

Sealed off: Life in Gaza

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

When I left the developed world of Israel at the Erez border crossing, I instantly entered the Third World—a crowded, tense and anxious Gaza Strip. What was surprising, however, was discovering that in this “hot house” crisis environment, one of the ways Gaza residents are coping is by spending their afternoons watching Dr. Phil and Oprah Winfrey.

I was also surprised to learn that the much-feared kidnappings, although usually motivated by the desire to inflict terror, to achieve calculated revenge, or to win profit, are sometimes acts of dare and challenge by bored young people.

“We have no place to go, we have too much free time and we have nothing to do,” said Mohammed Ismail, 22, an unemployed English major who aspires to better things—a graduate degree, for one—but acknowledges that being young and having grand visions in Gaza is frustrating at best, embittering at worst.

Gaza can break your heart: so much unused youthful energy and potential are being wasted. “Gaza is a troubled place, which is why [the Israelis] gave it up,” Ismail said as he and acquaintances spoke in the Beach refugee camp about life in Gaza.

Palestinians compare Gaza to everything from a mental asylum to a prison, created by pressures from the outside (Israel officially withdrew in 2005 but has been imposing sanctions since Hamas’s victory in Palestinian legislative elections in early 2006) and from the inside (the ongoing conflict within Gaza and the West Bank between Hamas and the more established party, Fatah).

As I spoke with Ismail and his friends, power went out for about a half hour, leaving us to chat and drink tea in the darkness of early evening. It was the close of a normal day in Gaza, even though this socializing happened just as the territory was about to be engulfed in a new wave of violence that would claim dozens of lives.

A few days later, 13 members of a Palestinian family in the Gaza town of Beit Hanoun were killed in an Israeli military attack. There was an international outcry about continued Israeli incursions into Gaza, with the Israeli government responding

that Hamas has not retreated from its declared aim of destroying Israel and replacing it with an Islamic state. Israel has also affirmed its right to protect its citizens from crude Qassam rockets fired from Gaza—though it later acknowledged that the civilian deaths in Beit Hanoun stemmed from a military mistake.

The situation prompted a call in mid-November by a coalition of nine Israeli human rights organizations for the protection of human rights in Gaza. The coalition, which included B'Tselem (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), Rabbis for Human Rights and the Israeli chapters of Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights, noted that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is abysmal: 80 percent are living in poverty (on less than \$2 daily); about seven out of ten in the territory's potential work force are without jobs or sources of income; and much of the population is experiencing daily electrical blackouts since Israel bombed Gaza's sole independent power station, the source of nearly half of the territory's power supply.

The human rights groups noted also that despite its 2005 pullout, Israel still wields effective control over much of life in Gaza—over movement in and out of the territory, over air space and territorial waters, and over much of the territory's taxation system and trade.

“The Gaza Strip is almost entirely sealed off from the outside world, with virtually no way for Palestinians to get in or out,” the coalition said. “Exports have been reduced to a trickle; imports are limited to essential humanitarian supplies.”

There are continued military operations. Through mid-November, the Israeli military had killed more than 300 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip during a four-month span. More than half of those victims, the coalition said, were unarmed civilians who had not been involved in any fighting; 61 of them were children.

The human rights groups agree that Israel has the right to defend itself—B'Tselem noted, for example, that deliberate rocket attacks on Israeli civilians are illegal under the Geneva convention and hence “unjustifiable under any circumstances.” But since Israel continues to have effective control over Gaza, it has “an obligation to ensure the welfare of the civilian population” and to uphold international humanitarian law.

None of the Palestinians I spoke to have a shred of hope that that will ever happen. Cynicism and suspicion about Israel (and by extension, the United States) run deep,

with some believing that Israelis are enjoying and even gloating over the current Fatah-Hamas standoff. (An Israeli official denied this last statement, saying that Israelis are merely confused about who constitutes the Palestinian leadership, which does not speak with a consistent, unified voice.)

As 2006 ends, there is heightened concern that the stalemate will escalate into civil war, with Gaza as its epicenter. That particularly alarms Gaza intellectuals and professionals who have been seeking to create, as one said, “a culture where [physical and psychological] borders are pushed away.”

However, on an evening punctuated as always by the sounds of distant gunfire, the talk among a dozen Gaza academics, writers and activists focused less on the internal standoff than on the Palestinian narrative of grievance and injustice, with many saying Palestinians are being punished.

“I have to make peace, but what peace?” said director and artist Ibrahim Mozain. He said Palestinians are being asked to forget their claims of land and minimize a legacy of displacement, dispersal and diasporas. He’s exasperated that Palestinians are told to be “polite and smile in the corner.”

He went on to say: “The whole world is blind to our reality. I’m under shelling, I’m under bombing, I’m without electricity and without a salary. . . .What kind of justice do you speak of?”

These conversations ended abruptly when I, along with other journalists and humanitarian workers, were told to leave Gaza immediately because the security situation was quickly deteriorating. On our way out, we ran into a loud and angry funeral procession for a Palestinian killed by the Israel Defense Forces. Minutes later, as we crossed back into Israel, we passed Israeli tanks. We suspected what was to come next.

Within half an hour we were safely back in Israel, eating lunch next to a squadron of soldiers at a quiet rest stop. We had left the prison of Gaza because we could. Our new acquaintances in Gaza had no such choice.

Chris Herlinger recently traveled to Israel and the Palestinian territories as a member of a delegation of U.S. journalists who had won Catholic Relief Services' Eileen Egan Award for Journalistic Excellence.