

GAZA / PALESTINE
**NO BOMBS PLEASE,
I'M SURFING**
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CAN YOU FIND HOPE AT THE END OF THE WORLD? IN A SUN-KISSED STRIP OF LAND IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, **CARSTEN STORMER** RIDES THE WAVES IN THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS STRETCH OF SAND AND FINDS THAT, WHILE THE GUNS AND TANKS COME AND GO, THE SURF AND SEA LIVE FOREVER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALESSANDRO GANDOLFI



Stiffly he stands there on the yellow sand, at the interface between the asphalt and the beach. Feet pointing straight ahead, eyes fixed on the sea, Mahmoud has been standing in silence for 10 minutes. The sea is spread out as flat as a sheet. The storms of winter are long gone. Apart from an Israeli drone gently buzzing on the cloudless horizon, all is quiet on the beach in Gaza. Too quiet for Mahmoud. A silent curse escapes his lips.

Mahmoud the surfer comes every day to this place on Rashid Street, beyond which the beach begins. He is counting the waves: after every five small ones comes a larger one. "Maybe it will work with this one," he murmurs, coming out of his trance. He runs his fingertips cautiously over his hair, which is a work of art styled with gel and hair spray.

Mahmoud Osama Al-Rayashi, smooth-chinned and 21 years old, screws up his eyes and knits his brow while he counts. One, two, three, four, five—nothing. Then a happy look comes into his eyes. The sea is beating its tidal rhythm like a metronome. Mahmoud tears his mobile phone out of his trouser pocket and starts speaking in rapid, brief exchanges: "Waves... yes... in half an hour... OK!... see

you shortly... *inshallah!*" Then he dashes over the road to a building made of bare concrete, with rusty satellite dishes on the roof and the beaten-up wreck of a car standing outside on the roadside. He races up the seven floors to the top, pulls off his jeans, dons his wetsuit (a gift from an American surfer), sticks his surfboard under his arm (also a donation), and hurtles back down the seven floors. There's no time to lose, for who knows when the sea will change its mind again. To get some surfing in at last—that's all that matters.

Mahmoud is the first to head down onto Sheikh Ejlien beach. A few minutes later, his best friend Ibrahim Arafat comes strolling along. He is a pious young man of 20, who seldom smiles. They embrace each other, slap shoulders, *as-salaamu alaikum, habibi*. The trio is completed by Yosef Abu Ghanem, the youngest of the three, who sometimes plays truant from school when the waves are good. Yosef is a kid with a sad look in his eyes. He's 17 years old and already bereft of dreams he knows can never be fulfilled.

They stand now on the threshold between reality and freedom: three friends, hardly out of childhood, resting their surfboards on the sand and gazing at the sea with eyes full of hope. They wait and watch in a state of nervous tension, their feet itching, eagerly clawing at the sand, toes churning up small sandheaps. Their gazes roam over the distance,

briefly fixing on an Israeli patrol boat which is plying to and fro out at sea, like a guard dog on a chain. Five girls wearing headscarves and black robes saunter by. They beam shy, slightly coquettish smiles in Mahmoud's direction, dart stealthy glances while nobody is looking. Tender longing, followed by disappointment. Their faces slacken as they realize the boys are staring right through them. Slighted, they turn and walk back into the shadows of half-finished concrete apartment blocks.

Waves mean everything to the trio, and above all they mean freedom. As far as they are concerned, the Gaza which lies behind them is simply a prison with a view—a view of the sea. Riding the waves is an escape, their way of defying all those who limit their dreams, their youth, their future: the Israelis, who have fenced in their cities, mined their borders and closed them in; the hardliners of Hamas, who fire Kassam rockets into Israeli residential areas and make peace impossible; and the United Nations, the United States and, others who talk a lot but do virtually nothing.

Gaza is a wretched strip of land, just 42 dismal kilometers long, and 10 kilometers wide, with 1.7 million inhabitants cooped into its constricted space, a port where ships no longer dock and an airport where planes no longer land. Gaza is barred off from the outside world; it's hard for anyone to get out, and scarcely anyone or anything ever comes



in. But none of that matters when you're on a surfboard. The burden of everyday reality drops off the moment the Mediterranean Sea caresses your skin. Surfing allows shattered emotions to fight back; it's a way of surmounting the status quo. "Let's go!" yells Mahmoud.

The boys run across the beach, sand scrunching under their feet. Mahmoud is practically dancing, with his surfboard held over his head. They fling themselves into the breakers, laughing, screaming, yelling with joy. Mahmoud, Ibrahim, and Yosef plow through the water which promises to restore their freedom for a while. It's cold. Inside and out, thanks to damp air and a rising wind, the temperature is down to a chilling 10°, but for the boys the most enjoyable part of the day is just beginning.

They are paddling on their boards in order to forget. The first wave is too small, so is the second. But the third one is all right: adrenalin and endorphins course through their veins; they become light-headed. All that concerns them is this wave, this moment of joy. Then comes the next breaker. Yosef falls off the board which he has to share with his brother, disappears in the white spume, emerges again, snorting and spitting out buckets of seawater, then gives the thumbs-up: all's well, no problem. Mahmoud and Ibrahim glide on the wave, their arms held high in triumph, making a V-sign with their fingers.

POINT BREAK

Above: Ibrahim Arafat and Yosef Abu Ghanem on Al Sheikh Ejlien, the "surfers' beach" of Gaza City, Palestine. **Below:** Mahmoud Osama Al-Rayashi surfing in front of the city. **Opposite:** Ibrahim Arafat checking his surfboard at the Annadi Al Bahri Marine Club.





WATCH ME NOW

Above: Women spectators gaze at Mahmoud Osama Al-Rayashi as he waterskiis in the port of Gaza City. Opposite: Yosef Abu Ghanem and Mahmoud Osama Al-Rayashi get ready to hit waves.

There are 47 surfers in the whole of the Gaza strip, but many more interested youngsters would try it out if they had a chance. Because of the blockade, surfboards are in short supply. Anyone who has one guards it like a treasure. They have to wait; for Israel has cut Gaza off from the world. Only the most urgently needed humanitarian goods are allowed through the border: electricity, medicines, food, but not surfboards.

Clearly, a bit of theater has evolved in this permanent crisis zone, and Mahmoud is its star performer. He's the king of the beach, the best surfer in Gaza, an Adonis with an abdomen as flat as a board, wiry and muscular. Girls adore him and sigh with delight when he emerges from the sea. Men respect him as an athlete and seek his company. When he is surfing, admirers gather on the beach, point at him as he mounts the waves, and clap when he does a handstand on his surfboard. They are proud of him, their local celebrity.

An hour later the boys come out of the water shivering, with chattering teeth, blue lips, and radiant faces, as happy and elated as if they were drunk. They then go to squat on a deserted beach guard's tower, where they can gossip, nibble nuts, share tips about the best way of tackling the waves. "Nobody controls

the sea. Nobody can dictate to me what to do. It's the only place where I'm able to be free," says Ibrahim.

It's Friday, the Islamic day of rest. Camels are ambling by, teenagers canter down the beach on ponies, women in sack-like black burqas observe the world through narrow slits—the boys call them Ninjas on account of their dress. Girls in headscarves, wearing jeans and high heeled shoes under their robes, huddle together, giggle, and share cigarettes. Other visitors to the beach are paddling in the cold water. Suddenly Yosef's features are contorted, eyes filled with panic, mouth compressed to a slit, lips blanched. His board has gotten dented and is letting water in. "*Mushkila!*" whispers Yosef in dismay, "Problems!" With his wet shorts and Barcelona FC jersey clinging to his body, he's feeling chilly and beating his chest with his arms. How could that have happened? *Mushkila, mushkila*, he repeats in consternation. "No problem," counters Mahmoud, running his fingers through the lad's wet hair and smiling at him. "We'll fix it." Yosef looks sceptical.

For the worst thing of all is not the Israeli bombs or drones, not the blockade, not the unemployment or the men from Hamas—not even the breaking of bones, says Yosef. At

some point everyone here has broken a hand, or bashed his head on his board or on a rock. That's just part of the deal. "We're not afraid of getting hurt," says Yosef indignantly, "of course not." No, the worst thing is if a surfboard gets broken. "A broken leg will heal," says Mahmoud, "but when a board breaks, that's the end." For you can't buy surfboards in Gaza, nor wetsuits. Most youngsters surf in their T-shirts and jeans, in all seasons.

Soon afterwards Al Hindi Ashour climbs onto the tower. Hindi, as everyone calls him, is the surfers' idol, friend, father figure, and role model—a legend—and one of the first people to surf in Gaza. Hindi has introduced some direction into their lives, and given their group the name "Gaza Surf Club"—though, strictly speaking, it's not a club. There is no proper clubhouse (only the beach guard's tower) and no membership fee (which none of them could afford in any case). But the Club label sounds good and gives them a feeling of solidarity. Anyone who owns a surfboard can join in. Gradually more surfers come over to the tower, one with his sister in tow.

Hindi, at 39, is the *eminence grise* of the Gaza Surf Club. Once upon a time he was Gaza's champion swimmer; nowadays he teaches children to swim and takes people on excursions in his motorboat for a few shekels. He hardly surfs any more: during the first intifada, the back of his head was slammed by an Israeli rifle butt, and since then he has suffered



REVOLUTION IN YOUR BACKYARD A TIMELINE OF CONFLICT IN GAZA

Shaped by the Armistice Line and the subsequent war between Israeli and Arab armies, Gaza was forged out of conflict from its genesis, making it a natural magnet for discord. In 2007, a year after the shaky resolution of the Israeli occupation, conflict struck again

JUNE 2007

Islamist military group Hamas takes over Gaza, ousting Fatah—the faction led by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas—and effectively detaches Gaza from the West Bank.

JULY 2007

Alan Johnson, a BBC correspondent who was kidnapped as Fatah-Hamas tension led to a breakdown in law and order, is finally freed.

NOVEMBER 2007

Represented by Fatah and done under Annapolis process, peace talks restart between Israel and moderate Palestinians. Throughout the proceedings, Hamas is kept out.

JUNE 2008

With Egypt acting as mediators, Hamas and Israel eventually consent to a six-month ceasefire in Gaza. Militants promise to cease firing rockets, while Israel claims to terminate all offensive operations.

NOVEMBER 2008

Israel becomes the first to break the covenant. Rocket fire resumes after they send ground troops to Gaza.

DECEMBER 2008

After more attempts to renew the ceasefire fall through, Israel launches Cast Lead, attacking all structures connected to Hamas.

Gaza and Tel Aviv are worlds apart: one hour away, girls in bikinis and beach boys with six-pack muscles are dancing on the shore to techno music, necking couples are lying on the sand drinking cocktails.

from painful pressure behind his left eye, with which he can scarcely see. "We were young, we were chucking stones at some soldiers," he says, grinning like a schoolboy. It was he who taught nearly all of the boys here on the Sheikh Ejlien to swim.

The beach is the ultimate place of retreat for the people of Gaza. But Hamas morality guards are everywhere—watching, regulating, patrolling the beach, checking whether everyone is behaving in an Islamic fashion: no holding of hands, men and women segregated. Soon a guard in black climbs the tower. He has a pistol stuck in his waistband, and is fingering his prayer beads all the time. He asks what a girl is doing among all the boys. He wanders off again, but the atmosphere on the tower has turned sour.

Anyone who wishes to know how surfing came to Gaza should visit Tel Aviv in Israel. Only sixty kilometers apart, Gaza and Tel Aviv are worlds apart. Here there are ruined buildings, veiled women, war debris, empty shelves, conservatism, narrow mindedness—and rebellion. One hour away by car, girls in bikinis and beach boys with six-pack muscles are dancing on the shore to techno music, necking couples are lying on the sand while young people in sunglasses sit at their laptops in street cafés drinking cocktails.

It's four o'clock on Friday afternoon and the weekend has just begun. A few steps away from the beach, in a narrow back street behind the Maritime Hotel, lives Arthur Rashkovan, surfing guru and skateboard champion. He's just woken up and is surveying his visitors with sleepy eyes. He's wearing surfing shorts and flip-flops and has shoulder-long hair bleached by sunshine and salt water. A tattoo of a gruesome face twitches over his knee.

This 32-year old is one of the founders of "Surfing4Peace," an organization which teaches Palestinian youths how to surf and supplies boards to Gaza. If it weren't for Surfing4Peace, the Gaza Surf Club wouldn't exist. It all started when Rashkovan received a call from the legendary surfer Dorian "Doc" Paskowitz, an American Jew. "Arthur," said Paskowitz, who was already nearly 90 years old, "there are a couple of boys in Gaza who urgently need our help." Soon afterwards the first 13 donated surfboards arrived in the Gaza strip. That was back in 2007, when Hamas had not yet stifled the atmosphere, the frontiers were open, and the hostile neighbors were merely eyeing each other in restrained fury.

"It's idiotic, what goes on here," says Rashkovan, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. People who swim in the same sea, live on the same coast, and ride the same waves aren't allowed



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to mix with each other. Gaza, Lebanon, Libya (Libya has the best waves in the Mediterranean)—as an Israeli, he is not allowed to surf in those countries.

The so-called peace process is getting nowhere, the talks have been going on for decades. “And what have they achieved? Here, I’m leading my own little revolution.” Which is: to get as many surfboards as possible into Gaza. He is supported in this by world-champion surfer Kelly Slater, and so far 23 boards have made it through the blockade by different devious routes. He permits himself a smirk of pride as he explains this. How exactly he gets things through is something he’s not going to reveal. As an Israeli, he is not allowed to enter Gaza. “It doesn’t matter. People who are busy surfing don’t fire off rockets, it’s as simple as that.” He can’t understand why his government bans the import of surfboards into the Gaza strip. “Surfing means freedom. The kids in Gaza don’t want to live in such a prison.” His dream is one day to surf in Hawaii

in a mixed group of Palestinians and Jews. Why should an Israeli Jew smuggle surfboards into Gaza? “Because it’s unfair for kids to suffer under the politics of their elders.” There are selfish reasons for doing it too. “We need peace, so that I can surf anywhere without hindrance—but especially with the boys in Gaza,” he says, grinning.

Hindi explains that 20 years ago women swam in the sea in bikinis, and if anyone went past wearing a black burqa everybody would turn around and stare. Now bikinis have vanished from Gaza. Once the so-called true believers got established, the lights went out. Hamas has banned dancing and music, and the sexes have to steer out of each other’s way on the beach. A pity, Mahmoud thinks, for he enjoys it when girls can watch him ride the waves and photograph him with their mobile phones. “It inspires me to surf even better.”

Mahmoud’s life bears a resemblance to the tides of the sea. His happiness level goes up when the waves arrive, and plunges rapidly

reached Gaza through illegal smuggling tunnels. In the evening he attends any weddings taking place in his neighborhood, where there is music and dancing—the dancing, of course, is only with other boys.

On the day Osama bin Laden was killed, Mahmoud was sitting in Hindi’s flat sipping coffee. Hindi’s medals hung on the walls, souvenirs of happier days. Mahmoud was talking about the war, the bombs which fell in his neighborhood, the blast which shattered the window panes. The smile vanishes from his face and his voice falters. Israel unleashed its “Operation Cast Lead” on the morning of December 27, 2008. The war lasted for 23 days, and took the lives of 13 Israeli soldiers—and 1,400 Palestinians.

During this time, the Riashi family hardly ventured out of doors. Whenever the Israelis announced a pause in the bombardment, they would make a dash to the market. The rest of the time, Mahmoud, his parents, and eight brothers and sisters huddled together and prayed that the war would end. There was no electricity and telephones were down.

Every day the same question would come to his mind: am I going to get through this war alive? During those weeks, he dreamed he was in Hawaii or California, watched surfing films, and leafed through tattered surfing magazines. Hindi puts an arm round his shoulders as Mahmoud rubs his face with his hand as if trying to wipe his thoughts away. Enough of that war. “Let’s go to the beach and see what

the waves are like,” says Hindi.

But the sea is as smooth as a mirror—there’ll be no surfing today. Anyway, Mahmoud’s best friends are otherwise engaged. Ibrahim is studying. Yosef has gone out to sea with his father. No waves? Never mind. When circumstances aren’t favorable, make the best of them. They decide to show off a bit, and Mahmoud fetches his surfboard and jumps into Hindi’s boat. The surfboard doubles as a water ski, and for a few hours they zoom across the harbor, where no ships have docked for years, Mahmoud towed along on a rope.

Excursionists and bystanders gather on the harbor wall to watch. There are family groups, fishermen mending their nets, youths smoking water pipes, children running about. They all enjoy the show, taking photos and clapping. Mahmoud makes his victory sign and smiles at the girls in veils as he skirts round the fishing boats.

Five bearded Hamas morality guards, squeezed inside a battered blue Fiat, are watching the goings-on. They finger their prayer beads, scratch their heads, stare grimly, and wonder what to make of this unusual performance. But they do not intervene.

Mahmoud is unperturbed as he executes one whirl after another. The sea is his stage, Gaza is merely a background. Then he draws a Palestinian flag out of his wetsuit and holds it up in the breeze. The onlookers roar with approval. □

BEHIND THE BLOCKADE

Above: Surfers observing the sea from the lifeguard’s lookout at the Annadi Al Bahri Marine Club. *Opposite, left:* Al Hindi Ashour in his workshop, where he repairs surfboards. *Opposite, right:* Surfing lessons for youngsters on the beach.

down again as soon as he comes out of the water. Mahmoud learned early on that he wasn’t the helmsman of his life, but merely a passenger. His greatest wish, he says wistfully, is to take part in surfing competitions abroad, to gauge himself against other surfers in Australia, California, Hawaii. Surfing is everything to him. It has taught him that life can have wings instead of chains; that there are possibilities for a young person even in Gaza. Whenever he feels he can bear life no more, he gets into the water. In general most people in the Gaza strip spend their leisure time at or in the sea, where they can be human for a while, enjoy themselves, and share some happiness with others. The best thing about it is that it costs nothing. A day on the beach makes Gaza bearable for a while.

Normal life is full of monotony and boredom, marked by unemployment and lack of occupation. When he isn’t surfing Mahmoud studies multimedia, plays football with his pals, chats on Facebook. Every day from 5 A.M. until noon, with his brother Ahmed, he mans the family stall in the al-Yarruk market, selling hubcaps, windscreens wipers, and rear mirrors manufactured in China, which have

surfing safari

FROM PERU TO THE PHILIPPINES, THESE SOCIALLY-AWARE SURFERS ARE DESTROYING THE STEREOTYPE



PERU

The organization WAVES (wavesfordevelopment.org) was founded in northern Peru in 2004, when a group of educated local and international surfers shared a desire to help local youth—with scarce resources—enjoy surfing.

USA

In Malibu, California, the Surfrider Foundation (surfrider.org) was founded in 1984 as a non-profit grassroots organization dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of

our world’s oceans, waves, and beaches.

INDONESIA

SurfAid (surfaidinternational.org) was started by a group of concerned surfers in 2000 who were struck by the preventable death in the Mentawai Islands. Today, the organization provides sustainable health change while cultivating local culture.

JAPAN

Australian and American surfers—including actress Hayden Panettiere—trooped to

Japanese waters to protest the salvage slaughter of dolphins in 2010. Before the surfers could reach the dolphins though, a fishing boat blocked their way.

EVERYWHERE

Surf For Life (surfforlife.org) peddles a different kind of experience—what they call “volun-tourism.” The organization connects surfers and non-surfers worldwide with community service activities.