



## DIARIES



LIFE AND DEATH IN ISRAELI-OCCUPIED PALESTINE



The trials of making a film in Gaza  
Susan Youssef writing from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, *Live from Palestine*, 22 March 2010

[ShareThis](#)[PRINT THIS PAGE](#)

- [Electronic Intifada](#)
- [Electronic Lebanon](#)
- [Electronic Iraq](#)

[RSS AVAILABLE](#) [RSS Help](#) | [EI RSS Feeds](#)

[Ali Abunimah's Gaza Freedom March blog](#)

[Support our work](#)

The poster image from the film *Habibi Rasak Kharban*, taken in 2009.  
(P.J. Raval)

23 December 2009

I am on a plane, on the way back from Palestine to my apartment -- a quiet, private place set in rainy Amsterdam. It is there where I will edit my film *Habibi Rasak Kharban* (*Darling, There's Something Wrong with Your Head*), a love story set in the Gaza Strip. I have just finished shooting it, the first dramatic feature to be made about Gaza in more than ten years. And it took me seven years of continuous development and fundraising to shoot it.

I first visited Gaza in 2002 when I was shooting my documentary *Forbidden to Wander*. It was then I saw children acting out the romance of *Majnun Layla*, a classical narrative recorded by the writer Ibn Qutayba in ninth century Iraq. It tells the story of Qays, who is driven mad by his love for Layla. Sufis later adapted the story, taking Layla as a metaphor for God.

There, in an empty gymnasium in Khan Younis, I witnessed a teenage Qays wade through imaginary desert sands, looking for Layla.

Gaza is flat, over-crowded, and on the Mediterranean Sea. Horses and

## NEWS & ANALYSIS

- [Opinion/Editorial](#)
- [Diaries](#)
- [Human Rights](#)
- [Development](#)
- [Israel Lobby Watch](#)
- [Internet & Tech](#)
- [Business & Economy](#)

## THE MEDIA

- [Role of the Media](#)
- [Coverage Trends](#)
- [Journalists in Danger](#)
- [EI in the Press](#)

people in full dress wade into the water. A cacophony of calls to prayer by neighboring mosques reverberate in the air. There are groves of palm trees in some parts, dirt-paved refugee camps in others, and hotels and restaurants on the beach in Gaza City luxurious enough to impress even me, a native New Yorker.

In 2002, the Israeli army destroyed fields of homes and staged aerial bombings. The heat was overwhelming. But even in this atmosphere, everywhere I filmed kids stopped by to give me their "hellos." It was also at this time that Mohammed, a local theater director, joined me to help shoot my documentary; he took complete care of me while respecting my space as a woman. I didn't pay him, give him a place to stay or even provide him with food. Unexpectedly, I fell in love with his immense kindness, his heroic commitment to art in a situation where most people are just trying to survive -- that is to say, I fell in love with him.

The experience of seeing the children's performance of *Majnun Layla*, and of finding love in Gaza, compelled me to retell the legend in the setting of modern-day Gaza. The film begins in 2001. Gaza has come under full closure -- Palestinians are not allowed to travel in or out via Israel. Two college students who have been studying in the West Bank -- Qays and Layla -- have been forced to return to Gaza. There, within the limits of checkpoints and societal rules, Layla is inaccessible to Qays, and he descends into insanity.

*Habibi* provides a depiction of an evolving Palestinian society, focusing on a love affair and a poetic tradition while situating the story in the reality of Palestinian resistance. By bringing to film the poetic parable, I state that at the core of Arab society is a desire for an expression of love, not violence. *Habibi's* protagonists struggle with a longing for romantic, divine love. It is this longing that makes their experience one that both Western and Islamic audiences can mutually understand.

It took me seven years just to be able to shoot *Habibi*. These years were personally dark, in which I endured many financial and emotional trials. During these years, I lost my love, Mohammed, and still spent every day trying to make a film inspired by my love affair and the classical romance of *Majnun Layla*.

Back in the US, in 2003, I began drafting the script and fundraising for another trip to Gaza.

Finally, in 2005 I made it back to Gaza to shoot sample scenes. From the moment I stepped into Gaza, it was evident to me that things had drastically changed during my three-year absence. On this second trip, schoolgirls spat at me on the street; teenaged boys told Mohammed, "Take care of your woman." Walking on my own, I heard men say, "How much is the meat?"

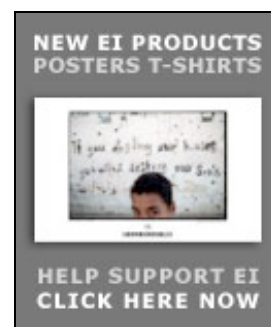
For me, the turn from an atmosphere where virtually no one paid attention to my uncovered hair in 2002, to an obsession in 2005 with my lack of cloth, was an indication of a rising Islamic traditionalism in reaction to an ongoing, deteriorating socio-economic crisis. Gaza -- a place that is nine miles wide and 25 miles long, where more than 1.5 million people live -- was and continues to be under full closure by Israel to other Palestinians, and to most foreigners. Some 55 percent of the population is unemployed

## ACTION & ACTIVISM

- Activism News
- Action Items
- Letters to the Media

## EI EXTRA

- BY TOPIC directory
- Arts, Music & Culture
- Satire from BNN
- Multimedia
- Letters to EI
- EI Shop
- EI Bookstore



## KEY RESOURCES

- Weekday Press Picks
- Wire Service Photos

## DIARIES FROM ELECTRONIC IRAQ

## RELATED LINKS: DIARIES & BLOGS

- [Arjan El Fassed](#)
- [Aron Trauring](#)
- [Bethlehem Bloggers](#)
- [CPT in Hebron](#)
- [Ran HaCohen](#)
- [ISM Journals](#)
- [MCC: Palestine Diary](#)
- Mohammed in

(according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency) and yet cannot leave to travel, for work or otherwise, to other parts of Palestine or elsewhere without Israeli permits.



The author and Mohammed shooting the film in Gaza in 2005. (Hala Aghaa)

Despite all this, in 2005 I encountered a willingness by Palestinians to appear in my film. I found volunteer actors and extras, and people generously gave me use of their farmland to reconstruct an Israeli checkpoint. With the generous help of the people of Gaza, I shot the sample scenes for *Habibi*.

I left in 2005 loving the Palestinians of Gaza. They took care of me, even though most had never seen my work before and I was not Palestinian.

The following fall I was in the Netherlands on a Fulbright fellowship, working with Ihab Saloul, who is from Gaza and was getting his Ph.D. at the University of Amsterdam. Together we discussed Gaza, my storyline, and the implications of the story I was telling.

At the start of the Fulbright, Mohammed confronted me with the question of if we would ever have a future together. I hoped to use his and my contacts to reunite in the Netherlands. I wanted him to get out of Gaza because I wanted him to have a safer, easier life, but for various reasons, these hopes were dashed. In the end, he said to me, "I was born in Gaza and I will die in Gaza." Soon after, he married someone else.

My own personal mourning only further propelled me to write the script, itself the story of tragic love. Ihab, who met with me almost weekly, was priceless in helping me get through the writing process. By the end of my Fulbright tenure, I had a shooting script. I began working on the next big hurdle: looking for a producer for the film.

In general, it was hard convincing any producer that a project to be shot in Gaza was a safe investment. So I decided to produce it myself. It took me two years to raise enough money to shoot in Gaza.

Rafah

- Nigel Parry
- Rafah Kid
- Rambles
- The Sanders

In March 2007 I arrived in Jerusalem. The Israeli authorities at the Erez crossing bordering Israel and the Gaza Strip claimed to have lost my paperwork on three separate occasions, so my request for a permit would instead go to the Ministry of the Interior. It was now a waiting game.

I began fearing that I might not ever get into Gaza. I began to ask myself: "Why not shoot *Habibi* in the West Bank and '48?" ('48 being the Palestinian territory formally recognized as Israel). Why not? Looking back on film history, hundreds of films have faked locations, from *Apocalypse Now* to *Robin Hood*.

I didn't get into Gaza in 2007. So I decided to make filming in the West Bank and '48 my goal and began fundraising to make that happen.

In 2009, when a grant that I had unsuccessfully applied for five years in a row finally came through, I had enough funding to shoot a very low-budget movie.

I decided to do everything I could to make Gaza a reality for production. Not just because of the way Gaza looked, sounded and felt -- but because I felt a yearning for Gaza. Many people there had been behind me from the start: working for free, giving me their homes, food, time and trust. Since 2002, Gaza had given me something to work towards, to have passion for - - I wanted to give back.

I didn't get into Gaza in 2009.

Filming in the West Bank was difficult because of the limited scope of field that we could include in the image. Most buildings in Ramallah (where we were based) have Jerusalem stone in the facade. Jerusalem stone is rarely used in Gaza. The West Bank is mountainous; Gaza is flat and by the sea. The film is set in 2001, when Gaza was dotted with buildings destroyed by bullets, shelling and bombings. The West Bank, thankfully, is not as ravaged.

In order to film Gaza beach scenes, we needed lead actors who could travel to the Mediterranean Sea in Israel and also work in the West Bank. I therefore sought and cast Palestinians with valid Israeli IDs. The beach scenes were filmed in Jaffa. For exteriors, we decided on Jericho, because it is flat. The rest of the scenes were shot in Ramallah and Birzeit. Later, while editing the film, I will incorporate archival footage shot by James Longley in 2001 in Gaza to show the truly catastrophic landscape that I could not fake in the West Bank or '48.

I mourned shooting in the West Bank and '48. I longed not only for the location of Gaza and the actors there, but also for the unique energy of the people of Gaza. In Gaza in 2005, I not only perceived that the cast and crew welcomed *Habibi* as the opportunity to make a Gazan film, but I also sensed a shared hunger for the experience of making a dramatic film set on the ground in Gaza. It was this hunger that I missed in the West Bank and '48.

The West Bank and '48 Palestinian cast and crew worked hard, but their spirits were different from those I worked with in Gaza. After all, they had never even been to Gaza: How could they be as committed in emotion to a place they'd never seen, to people they'd never met? And for many of the

West Bank/'48 cast and crew, *Habibi* was, in part, just another industry experience.

I left Palestine via Jordan, where interrogation was light and no one took away the hard drives that stored the film.

On the seven-year-long journey to make *Habibi*, there were so many times I wanted to quit. But I didn't, for reasons that changed over the years. At first I couldn't quit because I thought of *Habibi* as an expressive conduit for myself and for Mohammed and other artists in Gaza. Then, I held steadfast to the film as an elegy to my love affair and as an homage to the greatness of Arabic literature. By 2008, the war that raged on against Gaza made it even more pressing that I present my version of Gaza on the big screen in hopes of humanizing Palestinian victims of Israeli violence in Gaza.

But the real reason I didn't quit is as simple as this: every time I was close to dropping the project, someone else popped up to help me with it. After Mohammed left, Ihab mentored me through the writing process. When I could no longer enter Gaza, friends in the West Bank and '48 stepped in for production. When I couldn't get a producer for the project, grantors and donors supported me as the producer. I could continue to work on *Habibi* because of all the people who had committed to the project. It was no longer my film to stop working on. It was -- and is -- a film I share with the people who have entrusted me to work on it. Even as I edit the film here in my cool, dark apartment in rainy Amsterdam, I imagine you, dear reader, sitting in the audience. I imagine your support behind the film.

*Susan Youssef is an Amsterdam- and New York City-based filmmaker. You can follow her at @susanyoussef on Twitter or become a fan of Habibi Rasak Kharban on Facebook.*

#### **Latest articles on EI:**

**Palestine : Opinion/Editorial:** [Israel's blood diamonds](#) (29 March 2010)

**Palestine : Art, Music & Culture:** ["We are defending our culture": an interview with Samir Joubbran](#) (29 March 2010)

**Palestine : Diaries: Live from Palestine:** [Stuck between a wall and an occupation](#) (29 March 2010)

**Palestine : Human Rights:** [Restaurant attacked for barring armed Israeli soldier](#) (26 March 2010)

**Palestine : Opinion/Editorial:** [Visions of Palestine's present and future in "Invictus" and "Avatar"](#) (26 March 2010)

**Palestine : Human Rights:** [Rights groups dispute Israel's story in Hebron killing](#) (25 March 2010)

**Palestine : Opinion/Editorial:** [Israel's inclusion in economic organization a threat to democracy](#) (25 March 2010)

**Palestine : Diaries: Live from Palestine:** [Thirsty for justice](#) (25 March 2010)

**Palestine : Human Rights:** [Israel's latest provocation at al-Aqsa](#) (25 March 2010)

**Palestine : Israel Lobby Watch:** [US intent on dragging Israel to negotiating table](#) (24 March 2010)

The Electronic Intifada needs your ongoing help to offer information about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.