



**MARYN
LOCK**

**WITH
SARAH
IRVING**

GALIA

**BENEATH THE
BOMBS**

AFTERWORD BY RICHARD FALK

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In the text, some names have been changed to protect privacy.

We have done our best to check all our facts, but while I was writing from Gaza I was aware that language issues and the chaos of war could lead to errors. Any such remaining are entirely my responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Irving

In summer 2001, with the Second Intifada less than a year old, Palestinians, Israelis and internationals confronted increasing Israeli repression in the West Bank by forming the International Solidarity Movement. 'ISM', according to its website, 'aims to support and strengthen the Palestinian popular resistance by providing the Palestinian people with two resources, international protection and a voice with which to nonviolently resist an overwhelming military occupation force.'¹

From Israeli women in Salfit using the tactics of Western environmentalists to try and stop settlers destroying olive trees, to American students in urban areas living as 'human shields' in family homes during military incursions, a group started to coalesce. Over Christmas 2001 around 80 people – mainly European and American – answered a call to spend two weeks travelling round the West Bank and Gaza, digging up roadblocks, bearing witness as Palestinians carried out peaceful demonstrations and meeting political and community leaders. They even managed to flypost an Israeli tank outside Nablus with the martyr posters of a man killed standing on his balcony a few days before.

A similar call for support went out for Easter 2002, but plans to move around the West Bank in a similar way took a radically different turn when the Israeli military launched Operation Defensive Shield, a major re-occupation of all Palestinian towns and cities in the West Bank and Gaza. Some ISMers ended up as human shields with Yasser Arafat in his Ramallah compound, others in the Church of the Nativity or in refugee camps in Nablus and Bethlehem, or with Palestine Indymedia. This set the scene for long-term ISM tactics of providing witnesses and accompaniment for Palestinians engaging in non-violent resistance, such as the demonstrations against the Separation Wall at villages like Budrus, Biddu, Ni'lin and Bi'lin.

With its first deliberate attacks on international activists in 2002, Israel upped the ante in a way that culminated in the killings in 2003 of Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall in Gaza. But finding that even crushing them to death with Caterpillar bulldozers or shooting them dead did not deter ISM activists, Israel developed the Blacklist. From the start of ISM some activists had been denied entry to Israel and therefore to Palestine, all of whose borders are controlled by Israel, but after 2003 this means of keeping international witnesses from viewing Israel's human rights abuses became more systematic. More and more individuals found that gaining accreditation for peace conferences or even changing their names by deed poll wouldn't gain them passage into Palestine.

In 2006, a small group of these blacklisted individuals – including Sharyn Lock – decided that if the land borders into the West Bank were closed to them, they would attempt to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza by sea. Israel's 2005 claim that it had washed its hands of Gaza gave weight to the claim that, since the blacklisted activists were not passing through Israeli territory, the Israeli authorities had no right or need to stop them.

Despite threats and at times physical aggression from Israeli naval vessels, several Free Gaza boats did indeed succeed in taking human rights observers, journalists, medics and parliamentarians to Gaza in the autumn of 2008. They also brought out both international visitors and Gazans needing to leave, including students with visas for courses abroad who had been denied exit through the brutal vagaries of the Rafah crossing, and Palestinians who had simply been cut off from overseas family for too long to bear.

But with the Israeli military's Operation Cast Lead offensive, launched in the closing days of 2008, Free Gaza's boats were blocked by the navy. A small number of international activists had foreseen this escalation after tensions started to rise with the end of a long-term quasi-ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.

Among them was Sharyn Lock, who had been an activist with ISM since 2002 and who also had some basic medic training. She therefore decided to stay in Gaza, not only as an international witness but also assisting the emergency services during the darkest days of the Israeli invasion. But she also managed to find time to report her experiences

in the TalesToTell blog, which attracted thousands of readers across the world. One of those readers was myself who had been an ISM activist in the West Bank in 2001 and 2002. I worked with Sharyn to shape her daily tales of the horror of the Israeli invasion, the mundane brutalities of the siege and the tenderness, courage and humour of everyday Gazans into the book you are now holding.

During the 1948 *Nakba* – the ‘Catastrophe’ of the Palestinians when over 700,000 people fled their homes – over 200,000 refugees found their way to the tiny strip of land on the shores of the Mediterranean which is called Gaza (which previously had a population of only 60–80,000). For 20 years it remained under Egyptian control, until the Six Day War of 1967 when, along with the West Bank, it was occupied by Israel.

Gaza is almost entirely Sunni Muslim, with a small Christian community. Over 75% of its people are UNRWA-registered refugees (see p. 71), most of them living in eight camps or the neighbourhoods around them. But the poverty and desperation of besieged Gaza hides a long and rich history. Prehistoric humans passed through Gaza on their earliest journeys out of Africa, and ancient civilisations such as the Egyptians, Philistines and Assyrians established cities there. A key point on trade routes, it was home to marketplaces for spices, silks, wine, gold and olive oil. Vasco de Gama’s discovery of a sea route to India heralded the decline of Gaza’s international position, but under the Ottomans it became an important agricultural area, growing grains and later citrus. International influences also brought Gaza important creative traditions, including pottery, textiles, and an adventurous, spicy cuisine.²

The decades under Israeli rule have seen varying levels of conflict between occupier and occupied. With its massive refugee population – now around 1 million out of 1.4 million people – Gaza became known for the strength of its resistance, although large parts of its population were also dependent on jobs in Israel for their livelihoods.

The shooting of a truckload of Israel-bound Gazan labourers in 1987 was the spark which ignited the First Intifada,³ the popular uprising which lasted until the deeply flawed 1993 Oslo Accords which brought the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which was founded in 1964, back to Palestine, in theory to begin the job of building a Palestinian state. With

the beginning of the Intifada also came the birth of Hamas, the Islamist militant movement which helped to make religion a major factor in the until-then largely secular Palestinian resistance, and which became famous for sending suicide bombers – many of them from Gaza – into Israel.⁴

With its inadequate water supplies and cramped population, Gaza had few of the attractions of the West Bank for the Israeli state and, in a PR masterstroke, in 2005 Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza. This allowed it to present itself to an uncritical Western media and ill-informed Western politicians as making a magnanimous gesture, restoring Gaza to its Palestinian population, whilst actually relieving itself of a large security bill and of the dissatisfaction of the many Israelis who resented expending cash and soldiers' lives defending a small number of largely religious extremist settlers. It also allowed Israel to cut off the fierce Gazan resistance behind a continuous closed border, while it carried on controlling access in and out of Israel via Erez and several other crossing points, and effectively governing movement in and out of Egypt through the Rafah crossing.

Disillusionment with Palestinian Authority corruption and the lack of progress in the development of a Palestinian state helped Hamas, to its own surprise as much as anyone else's, to win the Palestinian Legislative Council elections of January 2006.⁵ Hamas formed a new government under Ismail Haniya, but Fatah (which still held the presidency) refused to relinquish power, so Hamas never managed to take control in the West Bank. The 'Quarter' – the USA, EU, UN and Russia – threatened to cut funds to Palestine on the grounds that Hamas was a terrorist organisation and Hamas-controlled Gaza was subjected by Israel to what was in effect an internationally-sanctioned siege. Always sporadic, Israeli permission to import basic goods – food, medical supplies, building materials – dried up almost entirely, and Israel started to withhold millions of dollars in tax revenue which should have been used to pay Palestinian public employees.⁶

The impacts of the siege on Gaza have been devastating. Food and fuel prices have spiralled, restricting people's diets and resulting in widespread malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies amongst children. 70% of the territory's population was estimated to be living in a state of food insecurity by late 2008⁷ and 80% of the population was dependent on food aid due to high prices and massive unemployment.⁸ The World Health

Organisation stated that 'Many hospitals were not fully functional before the current violence [Operation Cast Lead] due to shortages of drugs, medical supplies, spare parts, electricity and fuel',⁹ and projects to improve Gaza's inadequate water and sanitation systems were halted due to lack of funds and building materials – leading in one case to the deaths of several people in a village flooded when the wall of a sewage reservoir collapsed.¹⁰

Trapped behind a largely impenetrable wall, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups developed the tactic of firing rockets into Israeli towns on the other side of the border, most notably Sderot, although some Grad rockets with a range of up to 20km reached as far as Ashkelon. '3,278 rockets and mortar shells landed in Israeli territory [in 2008]. These numbers are double those of 2007 and 2006, years which marked a five-fold increase over prior years.' In early 2009, small numbers of a new type of rocket with a range of up to 40km reached Beersheba and Ashdod.¹¹ Some Palestinians and their supporters cited Israeli infringements of the ceasefire agreement with Hamas, Israel's refusal of Hamas's offer to extend the ceasefire period to a decade, and the disproportionate reporting of a few Israeli casualties compared to much larger numbers of Palestinian victims of Israeli armed operations. But with US and other political leaders providing emotive rhetoric about the misery of the people of Sderot, living under a 'hail' of rockets, the Israel government's PR machine presented the rockets as the perfect excuse to launch the massive Operation Cast Lead offensive on Gaza.

'An honest, forthright account full of compassion and insight. It plunges the reader into Gaza.'

JEREMY HARDY,

'Moving and understated. ... By sharing in the vulnerability of the 1.5 million Palestinians trapped in the crowded killing fields of the Gaza Strip, Sharyn Lock manages to humanise the inhuman. ... Unforgettable.'

RICHARD FALK, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Palestine (from the Afterword)

The Israeli offensive in Gaza was described by Amnesty International as '22 days of death and destruction'. Defying an international press ban, Sharyn Lock's eye-witness blogs became crucial reading for anyone following the conflict. Gathered here, they offer a unique account of the reality of life in Gaza beneath the bombs.

Sharyn Lock arrived in Gaza with the Free Gaza Movement, making it past the Israeli sea blockade in a fishing boat. Soon afterwards, Israel attacked Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants by land, air and sea. With others from the International Solidarity Movement, Sharyn volunteered with Palestinian ambulances, assisting them as they faced overwhelming civilian casualties. Sharyn's candid and dramatic accounts provide an important glimpse behind the media black-out of a people who face their oppression with courage and humour.

SHARYN LOCK has been volunteering in Palestine since 2002. She writes for *New Internationalist*, *Red Pepper* and the *Big Issue North*. **SARAH IRVING** is a freelance writer whose work appears in *New Internationalist*, *Big Issue North* and *Electronic Intifada*. She has been reviews editor at *Red Pepper* and *Peace News*, and features editor at *Ethical Consumer*. She has been an active campaigner on Palestinian issues since 2001.

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