

"Trying to break through the Israeli blockade":

Hagit Borer's anti-occupation activism and 2012 travel to Gaza.

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The authors of this chapter all met Hagit at different times and in different places. In what follows we recount our interactions with Hagit during different periods of her unwavering activism for Palestinian rights, focusing on October 2012, when we were all fortunate to have come together for an unforgettable journey to Gaza with Hagit.

Hagit left Israel in 1977 to begin graduate studies in linguistics at MIT, which she completed in 1981. That move was the beginning of a self-imposed exile from the country of her birth. Besides, for some of us, meeting Hagit through linguistics, each of us met her in contexts related to her Middle East activism. In Los Angeles, Hagit was an active member of the Committee in Solidarity with the Palestinian People (CSPP), a group founded in 1981 by graduate students and faculty at UCLA, including Susi Mordechai and Ed Keenan from the linguistics department, and which became an official campus organization in 1982 after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This is where Laurie met Hagit, in a non-linguistics context. She was as impressed by her strong commitment to educating American students about her country's crimes against the Palestinians and the fundamental role of the U.S. in these crimes as she had been by reading her PhD dissertation on theoretical syntax. Hagit, then at UC Irvine, came to UCLA for weekly meetings, and participated in campus events as a speaker, but also in bringing outside speakers to campus (e.g., Noam Chomsky came to UCLA at the invitation of the CSPP), and working information tables on UCLA campus, but also at Venice Beach. Laurie remembers feeling intimidated by jeers from Zionist students, and being very frightened by vociferous members of the Jewish Defense Organization (JDO) and the Jewish Defense League (JDL), on campus and at the beach, who verbally attacked CSPP members, hurling insults, etc. She admired Hagit, who boldly responded to these attacks, always getting in the last word, turning their words to nonsense with her cool logic. She also remembers demonstrating in downtown L.A. when Menachem Begin, at the time Prime Minister of Israel, came to Los Angeles. Demonstrators were comprised of a broad coalition of Palestinian activists, including Hagit and other CSPP members. Hagit wore a button that day left-over from protests against the British Falklands War: "Visit my country before it visits you". Indeed, Hagit has never hidden her Israeli nationality, but rather has openly shared her experience growing up in Jerusalem and learning about the reality of Zionism to provide a crystalline, personal voice for Palestinian rights.

Hagit was also quite instrumental in Máire's political education. When the latter spent a few days at Hagit's place in Hollywood in the early 2000s to give a talk at UCLA, she mentioned one evening that she'd love to visit Israel. Hagit responded that nobody should visit that country while it continued to occupy and dispossess the Palestinian population, and that certain countries deserved to be boycotted: "Don't spend your money there. If you are aware of the situation, don't go as a tourist."

And "not as a tourist" is exactly how Hagit traveled to Greece in June - July 2011, when she joined a group of about 50 people from the US aboard the *Audacity of Hope*, the US Boat to Gaza, part of the Freedom Flotilla that assembled 10 boats in different Greek ports, preparing to sail and challenge the Israeli blockade of Gaza. She wrote about the experience in her [Passenger to Gaza](#) blog, which includes short update posts, links to other writing, videos etc. In her [introductory self-description](#), she notes that the two things which make her optimistic in the face of the worsening Israeli occupation of Palestine are the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, and the Freedom Flotilla sending boats to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza. In a Los Angeles Times opinion column (June 26, 2011) she writes:

Let us note that some Israeli Jews do stand up and protest. There are soldiers who refuse to serve, journalists who highlight injustice, and human rights organizations, activist groups, information centers. In a sense, all of us seeking justice have been on a virtual boat to Gaza all these decades. We have been trying to break through the Israeli blockade, in its many incarnations.

Many of her blog postings reflect Hagit's razor-sharp analytical mind. In response to a statement from then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warning against the flotilla boats trying to enter Israel waters, [she writes](#):

'Israeli waters', now that's an interesting one. According to Israel, Gaza is not under occupation. But if so, how are we going into Israeli waters? And suppose Gaza IS under occupation - that would make it Israeli-occupied water. It would become Israeli water only if Israel were to annex Gaza. So is the State Department proposing to recognize an annexation of Gaza by Israel?

Very relevant questions, which of course were never answered by the State Department or anyone else. Hagit's US Boat to Gaza ["Passenger video"](#) (June 22, 2011), which she posts with typical wry

humour ("[Auditioning for Hollywood next](#)") makes it clear that her participation was intended to send a message not only to the Israeli and US governments, but also to the Palestinian people, as well as to fellow Israeli and US citizens, that we all have a role to play in ending the blockade of Gaza and the occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel. Though he had cited her work (Borer 1986) in his 1990s doctoral research, David Heap had no idea about Hagit's anti-occupation activism before a colleague told him she would be on the US Boat to Gaza. He met her in Athens when he was attending Flotilla steering committee meetings in June 2011.

The ten international boats ended up blockaded in different Greek ports by the Greek government's craven capitulation to US and Israeli pressure that prevented the 2011 Freedom Flotilla from sailing through a series of administrative-technical measures, an action which was described as the "outsourcing of the blockade of Gaza" to European waters. Ultimately, the US boat *The Audacity of Hope*, like the [Canadian \(-Australian-Belgian-Danish\) boat *Tahrir*](#), did not sail more than a few minutes before being stopped by armed commandos from the Greek Coast Guard and forced back to port (see [Audacity Stopped at Sea July 2, 2011](#)). Hagit was of course [on board](#) and [reporting about the experience](#), and afterwards stayed as the [group protested the seizure and impounding of the Audacity](#) in Piraeus (the port of Athens). She continued through July 2011, deconstructing media reports of [other Flotilla sailings](#) and commenting on [growing street protests in Israel](#) that month. Aware that all this was just one more step in a much longer struggle, she wrote that "our journey is only starting and we WILL be sailing on, audaciously, and with hope." ([Countercurrents](#), July 9, 2011). In an op-ed which Hagit co-authored with Ann Wright (retired US Army Reserve colonel and former US diplomat) replying in the Jerusalem Post to an earlier hostile piece deriding "flotilla folk", they explained some of the motivation of Freedom Flotilla actions against the Israeli blockade of Gaza: "insofar as our action is fundamentally political, it is intended to raise the awareness of our own people and to pressure our own government to change its course." (Borer & Wright, July 31, 2011).

The sort of folk that try to break the Israeli blockade by sea are also the sort of folk who answer the call for an academic conference in a fairly unusual location. Hagit was central in bringing the eight of us together and turning our dreams of going to Gaza into reality. In November of 2011, Philippe Prévost saw an announcement on Linguist List for a conference in Gaza, to take place in Gaza City the following October, and sparked the immediate interest of Verena Stresing (a biochemist), and his colleague Laurie Tuller, who contacted Hagit, who immediately was on board and in turn contacted Noam Chomsky, David Heap, and Máire Noonan. The latter two in turn got Stephanie Kelly (also a linguist) and Antoine Bustros (a composer) on board as well. From then on, Hagit was our liaison with

Mosheer Amer, colleague and conference organizer at the Islamic University of Gaza, obtaining formal letters of invitation for each of us, etc. Hagit was also our link to each other, suggesting we enter Gaza together as a group to increase our chances of successfully crossing the Egypt-Gaza border. Thus, the international delegation of scholars to attend the First International Conference on Linguistics and Literature at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) was born: six linguists, a composer, and a biochemist.

And so it was that, arriving from London, UK, London, Ontario via Nice, Montreal, and Paris, the eight of us, more than a little incredulous, found ourselves assembled at the Hotel Osiris, near Tahrir Square in Cairo, the 16th of October. We were to meet Noam, and Assaf Kfoury, a mathematician, for the drive across the Sinai to Gaza.

We left Cairo on October 18 at 7 a.m. Hagit had succumbed to food poisoning the evening before, of a severity that made the rest of us fear that the original instigator of this voyage would not be able to travel the next day. Luckily Antoine and David had gone out scouting for a pharmacy and had managed to bring back some potent medicine that had helped her get better again very quickly. Lest some think that this incident was caused by Egyptian food: it was caused by some noodles she ate at Heathrow Airport before her departure! In any case, Hagit had recovered sufficiently to travel in the morning, although she half slept through most of the journey. At a roadside café in the middle of nowhere, the first stop of our trip to the border crossing in Rafah, she even found the strength to step out of the car to meet and greet Noam and Assaf. Delicious Turkish coffee was served. When Máire went to buy some sweets, the cashier gave her a broad smile, said “Gaza” ([ɣaz.zah]) and offered to take a photo of us. Here is Hagit at the café, with some of us:



Rear: David Heap, Noam Chomsky, Antoine Bustros
 Front: Stephanie Kelly, Hagit Borer, Laurie Tuller, Assaf Kfoury

On the road crossing into the Sinai we were stopped. Our passports were collected, and some of the bags, only the men's, were searched. The car with Assaf and Noam seemed to have passed without stopping. There were a few moments of worry that they might want us to open all our suitcases, but after some exchanges with the driver and Antoine (here officially known by his Egyptian name Tarek) we were allowed to continue. At a second checkpoint, all passports were gathered. We had the feeling they were expecting us, probably by a call from the last checkpoint. This time it took longer. Every face was scrutinized against the passport photo. The officer in charge told us he would have to call his general to verify whether the road is safe. When he was gone, Hagit said this was just a cover. We were asked for our official authorizations to go to Gaza from the Egyptian consulates, which we all handed over. The consultation on the phone proceeded, while Antoine tried to explain about the linguistics conference. Language conference was accepted. After some delay we finally got the go-ahead, but from here on our vehicle would be accompanied by an armed police escort: 'For your safety.' The guys getting into the pickup looked young; young and with machine guns, and bullet proof vests. Hmm, we realized that we had "forgotten" to bring our own bullet proof vests.

Back on the road, David reached a contact in Gaza who told him that the police escort was great, that we would be safer (it was not clear over the cell phone whether this was ironic or not). Some of us worried whether the police escort now meant no toilet break, which we were in need of.

It turned out that President Morsi was also visiting the Sinai on that same day, which explained the heightened security (which in the end was not so much for our benefit: we had just picked the right day). We had a toilet stop at a mosque, where the women went in first. The guy guarding the entrance looked anything but happy with a bunch of Western women stumbling towards the men's latrines, although we had all covered up with scarves. Then the men went. The police escorts turned out to be a jolly bunch. They let David take a picture of them in their jeep.

After the police escort left us, the next stop was the Egyptian town of El Arish, where some of us had to get money from a bank machine to be able to pay the driver and the various border crossing fees. We were all keeping fingers and toes crossed that the border crossing would actually happen. On the other side there was a delegation from the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) to welcome us. There would be a press conference, and Noam would be asked to say a few words. David was now getting very excited. In fact, he had been so for 24 hours, but he could now no longer hide it. His last attempt to travel to Gaza had been in November 2011 with the Tahrir (CanadaBoatGaza.org) and had ended with six days in an Israeli prison (see Heap 2012). Finally, we were at the border. As the van pulled to a stop we saw Noam slowly walking toward us, breaking into a smile as he saw us waving to him, while Assaf seemed to be busy trying to get the paperwork done.

After about 15 minutes of bantering with a bunch of street money exchangers on the sunny, hot asphalt, Assaf appeared again, waving his and Noam's passports. They were cleared, meaning cleared to leave the first barrier of Egyptian bureaucracy (but we only discovered this later). Within moments they disappeared in their car. Noam just had time to say "See you back in the United States." We laughed, but somewhat uneasily. We felt left behind. We were supposed to cross over in a convoy. Noam's presence was supposed to help pave our way, and now we felt strangely abandoned. Hagit, still weak from her stomach bug, was not happy. But we tried to keep our spirits up while waiting. After a while Hagit also became more optimistic, and the color was returning to her cheeks.



After about an hour's wait we could go through. We all hopped into the van, the iron gate swung open, and we drove through. We were stopped again and someone handed our bunch of passports to Antoine. But suddenly there was confusion: Hagit's passport was missing! She spotted it right away, as it was her red Swiss passport. But then she realized that she had never given it to them! She'd had it in her bag all along. From the back we said, "Don't tell 'em. Just say it's ok." But then we quickly realized that this was not going to be a good idea, if she actually wanted to leave Gaza again. So we turned back to the gate. Our hearts were sinking, for this was surely going to be another hour, and maybe bad news altogether. But no, it was not so. We were allowed to continue, drive across to the next building, get out of the van, pay our driver and say adieu, and enter the large customs hall. At this point we needed to pay more money, but only two pounds, so that a guy sitting at a table could give us cards to fill out onto which he then glued stamps. Aghast we realized that we were still in Egypt. We had thought we were at the Gaza entry! Tarek (Antoine) gathered our passports with the stamped cards and brought them all to the counter as he was advised to do. We had to spend another hour in this hall. All the while Tarek was at the counter talking (what on earth could they possibly be

discussing for all this time?!). We realized that, without him as a translator, things might have been quite a bit dodgier. There weren't many people waiting on the rows of chairs. We were the only Westerners, it seemed.

Finally, we got the go-ahead. Now it was for real.





We walked across, and there, hardly believing it: We were in Gaza. We saw a forlorn pair – Noam and Assaf – walk toward us across the square, now with big smiles. They had waited for us to cross into Gaza.



There was then an excited bustle and everyone seemed to be speaking at the same time. Noam's triumph was even bigger, as the last time he had tried to visit a Palestinian university (Birzeit in the West Bank) he had been refused entry by Israel (what a PR faux pas that was!). With a typo, he told us, showing his passport on the page where a big stamp across says "Entery refused". HA HA! Now he was in Palestine. We were all here. And we found it almost impossible to believe.

We then entered a new van, suitcases and all, even though it was only about 200 meters further, at the end of which a huge delegation was waiting for us. They had to have waited at least two hours, as we had been so delayed. Cameras were poised, spotlights were on. Formal suits and big smiles all around. We felt dusty and underdressed, but so happy! David's eyes were brimming. And now there came a Charlie Chaplin moment: We all waited, because obviously it needed to be Noam to exit the van first. But Antoine (Tarek) who was sitting in front beside the driver saw everyone's eyes on him, and saw someone beckon him. So it is he who got out first to be introduced to the president of the Islamic University of Gaza. It was he who bowed and said "Antoine Bustros", and then realized the mistake, but had to carry on and greet the whole line. We were all quite unaware of this until later, when he told us the story and we laughed tears.





At the welcome event at the border, a few of the women among us somewhat hesitatingly covered their hair with scarves. Hagit, however, was having none of it; on the bus ride to Gaza city she said that there was no way she was going to yield to that kind of pressure. This made all the women decide to follow suit, as can be seen in the photo below taken during the welcome dinner in the university garden on the first evening, where we all appear bare-headed. This was a wonderful event, we were copiously fed and warmly welcomed. It was striking to sit there and see one of the buildings still in ruins from 2008 bombing.



Arrival: Evening welcome in the university garden, where we were presented with IUG scarves.



One of the buildings on the IUG campus still in ruins from 2008 bombing.



A memorable moment with Hagit happened the next day, our first real day in Gaza. The conference was starting the following day, so this first day had been packed with activities organized by the university. In the morning, our whole group had visited the city of Khan Younis, spent some time with dignitaries and officials from the city council, learned about the economic and environmental problems Gaza faces because of the Israeli siege, drove through a refugee camp with its pitiful living conditions and finally visited the main hospital of Khan Younis to see firsthand the abysmal conditions under which the courageous doctors have to work there. After a brief lunch break, Laurie, Philippe, Assaf and Verena then accompanied Noam to a university event with graduate students, where he gave a 2-hour speech about the Arab Spring and the situation in Palestine and sat through a question and answer session in the afternoon heat during which Laurie was busy handing him glasses of water since he was slowly losing his voice.

By the time they returned to the hotel it was past 6 p.m., they had been on their feet since 7am with hardly a break, and they felt utterly exhausted. Everyone decided to relax for an hour before dinner, except for Noam, who immediately had to attend yet another student meeting which took place in one of the conference rooms at the hotel where we were hosted, Hotel Al-Mathaf ("The Museum", because of the impressive collection of archeological artifacts it houses).

An hour or so later Verena was the first one to file downstairs in search of some food. When she passed the conference room she saw that the student meeting was still ongoing and Noam was still in there busy answering questions from the audience, a very lively crowd of young people. The room was hopelessly overcrowded, very hot, and there was almost no oxygen left. At this point, Noam had been up since the early morning with no break and had been speaking for hours. He was 83 at this time, and his voice was almost gone. Verena decided it was time to put an end to this and to get Noam out of the room alive. But how? Since Hagit knew him best, she went to her room and asked for her support. When Hagit and Verena returned to the conference room, the Q&A session had finally come to an end, but instead of leaving, audience members started crowding the speakers table, yelling out more questions or trying to get a picture with Noam. At this point even Noam said that he couldn't go on anymore and gave Hagit and Verena a desperate look. Verena remembers throwing herself into the masses with Hagit, trying to shield Noam with their bodies and half drag the man out of the room. She remembers feeling quite intimidated by the crowd closing in on the two of them. Not so Hagit. She firmly refused to let any more people approach Noam, despite the mounting frustration in the room.

Finally, outside the room and on their way to the elevator, the three were quickly approached by another university official informing them that there was yet another event - a dinner - planned that evening for Noam. It was now past 8.30pm, and Noam himself had repeatedly said that he'd had enough. If it hadn't been for Hagit, he probably would have given in, nice man that he is, but Hagit would have none of it. She told the official firmly that the dinner was canceled, which didn't make her any friends, thus showing her real concern for the health and welfare of her friends. Luckily, the event could be rescheduled for the next evening.

When, after all this commotion, Hagit, Verena and Noam finally made it to the elevator, one of the ever-present photographers somehow slipped through and stepped into the elevator with them, where he immediately started taking photos of Noam by literally pushing the camera into his face. Verena remembers starting to giggle in the face of the absurdity of the situation. Hagit, however, simply looked the photographer in the eye without moving a muscle. Ah that look; it must have made him feel about 5 years old and very naughty. We finally managed to arrange a private dinner at around 10.30pm away from the hotel lobby, where students and press people were still lingering a bit.



Opening of the conference at the IUG, with some of our delegation in the front row (L to R: Antoine, Máire, Verena, Philippe, Stephanie and Hagit).

During the second day of the conference we got word that the Estelle (Swedish ship to Gaza, part of the Freedom Flotilla coalition, freedomflotilla.org/) had been attacked and seized by the Israeli Occupation navy (shiptogaza.se/sv/node/1179). A range of civil society groups had arranged a press conference in the port of Gaza, where of course they wanted Noam to speak. We had to spirit him away from the university and down to the port, and when we arrived we faced a crowd already assembled. It would have been difficult to make our way through the throng to the mic. We realized however that social conventions meant the mainly male crowd would give way to women, and so the women of our delegation, led by Hagit, formed a human wedge which cleared a path for him, as Noam joked about his "female body-guards".



Noam speaks at the press conference in the port of Gaza, after the seizure of the Freedom Flotilla ship Estelle (Hagit is second on his right).

After the morning sessions, our group had lunch at the university. One of the faculty staff, a young woman, had accompanied us to the university cafeteria, where we would have gladly stayed to eat. The cafeteria staff was clearly unprepared for us showing up like this, but they still managed to put food in front of us within a couple of minutes. However, the university officials had other plans for us, as they had a special room prepared for our lunch. We would have liked to stay in the cafeteria in the midst of university life, but they probably feared that this wasn't "nice" enough for us. There might also have been an issue with this being the male campus, and five of our group being women with uncovered hair might have been considered too much of a distraction. In any case, we were able to enjoy an excellent lunch in our private room, which had probably been prepared by the university cafeteria anyway, since the packaging looked similar. A lively discussion on food ensued: Palestinian food is delicious, and for anyone who likes hummus, between the eight of us we could compare hummus from several countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Turkey and even Israel) and the decision was unanimous: Palestinian hummus is the best. Hagit remarked that this hummus was the closest she could get at that point to "a taste of home", since for many years she refused to return to Israel "because so many others cannot return."



After lunch on the second day of the conference, we were taken to the Ministry of Detainees, where we were to meet with the families of prisoners detained in Israeli jails. Everything had been set up as usual: a head table for Noam and some officials, including those who had been assigned to accompany us throughout our visit, with microphones and cameras for the press, a side table for us, and then, on the other side opposite us, another table with several women already seated, mostly older, some wearing niqab, some of them holding large pictures of their imprisoned sons and with two smaller frames showing pictures of two young men in front of them.



(photos from Music4Gaza, Maire's blog).

The event started as usual with speeches by the officials who had invited us, followed by a short speech by Noam. We were then shown a short video that showed the disturbing and violent

capture of a 12-year-old boy by Israeli soldiers, despite the pleading of the mother and other family members present at the scene. A young woman with excellent English, Mukarram, translated for us what we saw. The officials continued to monopolize the event, kept talking as though it was all about them and their issues. Eventually the women were allowed to speak and we listened to the testimonials of the women sitting opposite us, who had come to tell us about their sons. An older woman with a poster-sized photo introduced herself and told us about her son, who had been imprisoned for six years by then, while she had been allowed to visit him only once during all this time. This time, a university official who had accompanied us translated for, not the young women from before. After this short testimonial, another woman, a younger one this time, told us about her husband, who had been in jail for seven years by then. At the time of his arrest, the woman had been pregnant with their son. By now, the son was in school and had never seen his father.

We listened quietly for some time to the stories of these unfortunate women. We learned about their pain and strife of dealing with raising a family alone, while their husbands or sons were incarcerated. After these brief testimonials, the university officials introduced to us two (male) intellectuals who were then invited to speak. We had become so used to enduring speeches by men that no one said anything. These same men had constantly interrupted the women and tried to prevent them from telling their stories. When their speeches ended, we were surprised to learn that this was supposed to be it, that the encounter with the mothers and wives of detainees was over and that we were now supposed to proceed to an exhibition. We had expected to have a chance to actually speak to the families of the prisoners person-to-person, instead of listening to some officials making speeches. The women themselves seemed to feel the same way. One of them demonstratively put away the two pictures of her sons she had been holding and insisted on coming to the front of the room. When she started speaking, we could see and hear from the tone of her voice that she was trying to control herself; she was clearly angry. The young woman who had interpreted the video clip earlier, Mukarram, told us that this woman was insisting on saying something. A university official translated, and at the same time tried to assure us that the woman didn't mean to offend. But none of us was offended, on the contrary, we felt that she had every right to ask us why we had come and what, really, we were going to be able to do for her and her companions that would make a difference and help her and the prisoners.

She was right and her speech rattled us into reacting; we had been way too silent, following the protocol and order of an important university event. But in a setting like this, where women were supposed to talk about their personal grief and horror, being confronted with a delegation of

Westerners staring at them and politely listening to speeches must have felt insulting. We all felt very guilty at this moment for not having interacted more. She asked us what we were going to be able to do, how this visit was going to help her and the others in bringing about a change. She was almost charging at us. It was clear that she was livid, and we suddenly felt galvanized and yanked out of our stupor of enduring speeches and not being able to interact with people outside formal settings, speeches, etc. We felt released, alive: a breakthrough, finally.

Then the lid flew off the pot: Hagit grabbed the microphone and started speaking directly to the women, almost shouting that we had come to listen to them, not to one speech after another by men. It was *their* stories we wanted to hear. Mukarram translated. She too was now alive. The mic went around and all the women from our delegation spoke, saying that we were there for them and not for the speeches. Hagit insisted that from now on Mukarram should translate, women to women, with no officials between us.

Overcome with anger and frustration, Stephanie gave the most emotional speech of all, saying that we had not come here for political gains or to make ourselves important, but to meet those who are most affected by the situation in occupied Palestine. That we wanted to hear all their stories, not only the three short testimonials, that we wanted details, that what we could do was to get their stories out in the West, and that the more details we were given the better we could do our job. She had tears running down her cheeks while she was saying this, and it affected all of us, including the women opposite us. In the end we all had tears running down our faces, as did the women across the room. It was an outburst, but none of the women appeared uncomfortable. When a university official tried to start interpreting again, Laurie interrupted and asked for Mukarram to continue, which she did willingly. The male officials were completely out of the picture, pushed aside by the avalanche of female emotions, although the men in our group later commented that the officials didn't seem to be too angry with us. We might have broken protocol, but at least one of the officials was apparently smiling, perhaps with relief.

And so it happened that we finally learned the details, names and stories of what life was like for these women who are not able to see their sons for years, who are not allowed to bring anything inside the prison, not food, nor clothes, not even medication. Who have their sons suffering from illnesses that go untreated in prison. We always get to know the names and stories of Israelis, never those of Palestinian detainees or victims, who our media regularly buries in a mass of victimised (or violent) groups and never individualised. While the other women were telling us their stories, the

woman who had started it all sat in her place and smiled at us, and then slowly took out the two pictures of her sons again and put them up in front of her once more.

After everyone was done, we got up, and the same woman (we love her!) came across to hug Hagit and Stephanie, and then all of the women in our group. We crossed to their side: more hugs, kisses. It was cathartic. The women pitied the men amongst us, for cultural barriers prevented them from hugging these women, who seemed so relieved to have been able to speak freely, to pour out their frustrations and sufferings. It felt good: this lasted long moments. By now, we had thoroughly upset the schedule. One of the male officials was trying impatiently to edge us into the next room where we were to be shown more information about the prisons and prison conditions, which after the women's heart-felt testimonies felt even more impressive, more heartbreaking.

Later, Hagit told Stephanie she was moved by her reaction, and commented to all that her emotional response to the situation was highly appropriate and warranted. She also said that the outburst was "the perfect mix of angry and sexy to get their attention." In turn, Stephanie was touched by Hagit's defense of her empathy and felt surprised by the willingness of this prominent academic to interject on her behalf.



The final day of the conference at IUG included a special session devoted to activism. David and Hagit each spoke. After introducing herself, Hagit began with, "I am originally from Israel; I grew up in Jerusalem." There was an immediate ripple of nervous exchanges among the students in the packed auditorium. The young woman sitting next to Laurie turned to her with a look of shock on her face, and asked "She is *really* Israeli? I have never seen an Israeli before except with a gun in their hands." Hagit continued, "The 1967 war was to me important in my own personal development. I never accepted the occupation; the occupation never made any sense to me. And as years went by, I became more and more political to the point that by the early 70's I rejected Zionism and came to consider myself an activist." The students were all ears, some of them applauded, and she continued her personal story with "When I was 15 I went for a walk in the old city of Jerusalem..." The first

question asked by the students was about what solution she saw for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Characteristically, Hagit answered carefully and logically, "I think there's more than one solution. I think there's more than one *just* solution. There are various proposals that have been around for many, many years by now. The problem is not the absence of creative solutions, but that one of the parties is not interested in a solution. Once Israel and, primarily, the United States are interested in a solution, then there are lots of ways to solve the problem—immediately, gradually, dividing the land this way or that way. These are all things that are open to negotiation for future arrangements, once there are true negotiations that involve good will. Myself, I am of the view that ... one man, one vote." Grabbing back the microphone which she had just returned to the interpreter, she hastily added, with a smile, "And one woman, of course!"



PHOTO: At the closing conference dinner, Hagit thanked the IUG organizers, our hosts, on behalf of all of us. Each of us received a certificate of attendance.



Our delegation following the final conference dinner in Gaza, from L to R: Verena, Antoine, Hagit, Noam, Laurie, Máire, Philippe, David, Stephanie.

The day after the conference – Noam and Assaf had left that morning – we gathered in the hotel lobby, getting ready for a visit to downtown Gaza. We had heard gunfire all night long for a second consecutive night, and now while we were still having breakfast, we again heard loud machine gun shots really close by and the sound of helicopters in the air. Verena remembers the feeling of adrenalin shooting into her bloodstream and being amazed by how calm and cool everyone else appeared, especially Hagit. When she asked if anybody else was scared, Hagit calmly reassured her that her reaction was perfectly normal and reminded her that she, Hagit, had grown up in Israel and had seen and heard much worse. So she told Verena that she shouldn't worry, because "until the bombs drop onto the block next to you, there's nothing to worry about. I don't get nervous before then." During our conversation, David received some emails from activist friends in Gaza that read as follows:

"I went to Beit Hanoun this morning to accompany the farmers, there was an Israeli airstrike and a person died, we went to the hospital where I saw the body of the martyr, he was part of the

Palestinian resistance, then we went to the place hit by a missile. Drones were flying continuously, I knew about an Israeli incursion also in the east of Jabalia. At this moment there is still some shooting in east Beit Hanoun, the situation is not good. This morning, two Israeli airstrikes killed two men in Beit Hanoun and in Beit Lahia, and injured 4. In Beit Hanoun the heavy fire by Israeli warplanes and tanks prevented the students from going to school, 3 schools were evacuated.

And another one:

“Four fishermen were arrested this morning by the Israeli navy while they were fishing in Gaza waters (2 miles offshore).¹ They are now in Ashdod and the soldiers confiscated their boat.

These emails explained the machine-gun fire we had heard all through the night and in the morning. Shortly after this news, rumors started pouring in that the border in Rafah would be closed the next day – the day some of us were supposed to leave - due to the surprise visit of the Emir of Qatar, the first state visit for the Palestinians from the leader of another country in many years.

There was nothing to be done, the information we were receiving was so conflicting that we decided to leave the hotel and visit downtown Gaza anyway. We visited a museum from the Mamluk period, walked through the ‘gold market’ and the streets of old Gaza City and then visited the oldest mosque of the city, where the women among us had to cover up their hair.

1 Under the Oslo accords, Palestine should control a maritime economic zone of 20 nautical miles, but in fact the Israeli Occupation navy imposes much smaller limits, that vary arbitrarily between three and nine nautical miles: attacks such as these, on fishing boats at two nautical miles, were actually inside the smallest nominal limit. Such attacks on unarmed Palestinian fishing vessels within Palestinian waters are a routine occurrence, see Solidarity with Gaza Fishers (2017), Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (2020), Gisha (2020).



At the Al-Pasha museum, Gaza City: Philippe, Verena, Hagit, Máire, Laurie, and our friend, Maya Shalaby



After the visit downtown, we all went to the very first BDS concert in Gaza, organised by our friend Haidar Eid, a professor at Al Aqsa University, where Antoine performed, as well as singer and oud player, Mohammed Akila with some other Palestinian musicians.



After the concert we went to a meeting, also organised by Haidar Eid, with some members of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organisation Network (PNGO), where we heard about the effects of the blockade on Palestinian [civil society in some detail](#).

That night, it was still not clear whether it would be possible to cross the border at Rafah the next day, and which side (Egypt or Palestine) was responsible for the closure. During the night, we could hear the most violent gun shots yet, as well as helicopter or drone noises off the shore all night long, and the next morning it was clear that the departure of Hagit, Laurie, Verena and Phillippe would be delayed, since the border was closed for the day because of the state visit. So we spent the day in the hotel, hoping that a window of opportunity might open at some point where we would be able to cross the border in Rafah. Hagit was the one who was most pressed to leave Gaza, since her flight home was leaving in the early hours of the next day and missing it would mean major inconveniences for her back home. She was determined to leave whenever possible, even if that meant a night crossing of the Sinai, which was reported to be unsafe after 3 p.m. During our long morning in the hotel restaurant/lobby, Hagit suggested that we should use the time to write an article about our visit, entitled [How Chomsky came to Gaza](#) (Weiss 2012), with the aim of clarifying how it was that we came through the auspices of the Islamic University of Gaza. Hagit thought it was important to do this, first to remove any potential misunderstandings about Noam's reasons for visiting Gaza, and second because, even though he had gone beyond the very tight-knit daily schedule our IUG hosts had planned for him, in order to meet as many groups as possible, he had not been able to satisfy every sector of Palestinian society who understandably had wanted to meet with him during his limited time in Gaza.

Around 4 p.m., it became pretty clear that there was no hope of the border reopening that day, so some of us decided to pay downtown Gaza another visit. Back in the hotel that night, from our hotel room windows, we saw the scariest sight yet: in the north, towards Israel, the sky was glowing red. Continuous and very loud rumbling noises, like the rumbling of a thunderstorm, could be heard. For those of us not yet used to the sound of rockets it was difficult to distinguish them from the sound of real thunder, but since there was no rain while smoke and fog could be seen in the glowing red sky, it was pretty clear that this was not a natural weather event.

The next morning, after just a few hours of fitful sleep, Hagit, Laurie, Philippe and Verena were all packed up to get away from what sounded like an army of planes flying above. It was just before 7 a.m. when suddenly a very loud explosion was heard, very, very close by. The hotel shook, and Philippe and Verena could feel the shock waves underneath their feet. They rushed down to the lobby, where

they met Laurie and Hagit, both visibly shaken as well; when Hagit gets nervous, then it's really time to leave!

When we (Hagit, Laurie, Philippe and Verena) finally left, our trip through Rafah didn't do anything to calm our nerves. While the noise of the F-16 bombers was a little drowned out by the noise of our van, our little group still felt that we were under attack. Verena remembers seeing something smashing into the field next to our van, maybe 20 meters away from the road, and a flame about a meter long flaring up on impact. To this day we don't know what it was, but it certainly wasn't good. Once we arrived at the border in Rafah, our passports were stamped quite quickly, and the four of us took one last picture with Mosheer, who had done so much for all of us, at border building where only the day before the Emir of Qatar had shaken hands with the Prime Minister.



Saying good-bye to Mosheer (left) - in the van, from left to right: Verena, Hagit, and Laurie

After the border proceedings, we climbed on a bus that was supposed to bring us to the border with Egypt, and there... we got stuck. Our bus had to stop in the middle of no-man's land with a barbed-wire fence on both sides, not quite out of Palestine and not quite inside Egypt yet. We were trapped behind three other buses trying to leave Gaza. The driver stopped the engine, and, in the silence, we

could hear the roar of the F-16 bombers again, very close by, flying incessantly above our heads. On top of that, we started receiving messages from our friends back in Gaza that there were rumors the border might be closed again because of the air strikes. This would mean that we would have to turn back and drive again through Rafah, which was clearly under attack. We sat in the bus, scared into silence, listening to the sound of bombers, telling ourselves that Israel wouldn't dare to attack the border, that at least as long as we were stuck here, we were safe, hoping that the border wouldn't close. This probably lasted for no more than 10-15 minutes, but it felt longer. Finally, the gate opened, and we were led through. When we finally stood in the Egyptian border building again, we felt quite relieved, not thinking about crossing the Northern Sinai that was still ahead of us.

We were picked up by a driver on the other side of the border following passport control and took off in a hurry. The trip through the Sinai felt like a blur, mainly because the driver either had some important business to attend to or was simply reckless. He was driving at 150 km/h on a bumpy desert road like an absolute daredevil. At least the road was completely empty! We were stopped only once at one of the checkpoints, where the same Egyptian soldier who had had to call his general to see whether it was safe for us to proceed the week before was again on duty. He smiled and waved good-bye, clearly remembering us.

After making it through ridiculous traffic in Cairo, we finally arrived around 8:30 p.m. at the hotel we had booked for the night. None of us is very picky when it comes to hotels, but let's just say dried vomit on the carpet and a crushed cockroach on the wall was stretching it a bit too far. And so it came to be that our trip ended in the restaurant of the 5-star Le Meridien Heliopolis hotel, the only other hotel we could find so late at night. It was the most bizarre feeling for those of us sitting there, in the air-conditioned luxury of the hotel, a meal in front of us and laptops on the side, trying to contact our friends who had stayed behind, with the sound of the bombers still in our ears. That night, every time a plane could be heard (not a rare event in an airport hotel) that feeling of being under attack came back. And to think that this is a part of the daily reality in Gaza... The resilience of its people has to be admired, but more than that, the Palestinians of Gaza need our support.

As the last of our group left Gaza in the following days, it became clear that another Israeli aggression was underway (the so-called "Operation Pillar of Cloud"). We co-wrote and published a denunciation of the Western media's under-reporting and misrepresentation of Israeli military violence, largely against Palestinian civilians in Gaza (Borer et al. 2012a, 2012b). Different members of our group presented reports of our trip in different venues (Chomsky 2012, Democracy Now! 2012), including a round-table at the Université de Tours in 2013, where Hagit presented. While we all remain active in different ways, Hagit has been doing particularly important work on with the 2021 statement

by UK Israeli academics opposing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's "Working Definition of Antisemitism" (<https://www.israeliacademicsuk.org/the-letter>, see also Kastner, this volume) about which she wrote in the Times Higher Education (Borer 2021).

Each of us is grateful to Hagit for her activism, for how she has touched us personally and politically as well as professionally, and we are happy for this opportunity to express publicly our admiration for her.

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