



Why Gaza says yes, mostly

It's the 70th month of the uprising; the 27th year of the Israeli occupation; the night before peace ... In Gaza **GRAHAM USHER** encounters an outpouring of joy spiked with dread

AN ISRAELI SOLDIER SITS ASTRIDE a wall outside Gaza Central Prison, clasp his helmet. In peace — as in war — Gaza seems to elude his understanding.

A large crowd, uncontrollable, surges into the square. Pictures of Abu Ammar — Yasir Arafat — are everywhere. A pounding chant rises: "Gaza, Gaza. Jericho first, then Jerusalem."

" Hamas," a boy, no older than 14, tells me, "is finished."

Another youngster shakes his head in disgust, "They have forgotten Palestine." He drags his bicycle wearily onto the road and rides away, an outcast from the party.

Then a father strides towards me, a son and two daughters in tow. He shakes my hand furiously. I don't know him, but gregariousness in Gaza is as ingrained as resistance.

"What about the peace? What do you think?"

I reply, honestly, that I don't know.

"It's good," he says.

We watch a group of about a dozen young men gather round an Israeli soldier who chats with them in Arabic. The father lifts the youngest daughter onto his shoulder and kisses her gently on the forehead. "It's good," he repeats. "Because of the girl."

The conditions of withdrawal

Let's rewind the film, to April of this year. The occupied territories are being rocked by some of the most intense outbursts of Israeli-Palestinian violence since the *intifada* began in 1987.

The Israelis are scared, not just *in* the occupied territories but *of* them — in west Jerusalem, Jaffa and Ashkelon. On March 29 the daily *Yediet Aharnot* comments: "If the present wave of violence continues it will only be a matter of time before an overall confrontation breaks out and the real balance of forces between the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and the stabbers will be brought into play. Again the Palestinians will be the ones to pay the price."

A day later Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin casts an iron curtain across the territories and announces "tough new measures" to "take Gaza out of Tel Aviv". "It is better," he declares, "for the Arabs not to be swarming around here."

For the next two months, IDF foot-patrols, sometimes 40-deep, trawled through Gaza with the task of "reclaiming the towns and camps from masked gunmen" while "search operations" — deploying anti-tank missiles, explosive charges and helicopters — blew up scores of houses, displacing hundreds of families.

Special IDF units masquerading as Palestinians infiltrated camps and villages to flush out *intifada* activists. Across the Gaza Strip, observation posts were set up with "open fire" regulations so broad that they were tantamount, in the words of one Israeli journalist, to a licence to kill.

The political message rammed home by the Israeli terror was summarised trenchantly by a senior IDF source: "[The closure] did have a profound psychological effect on those

under closure. It shattered their illusions that terrorism will simply cause us to abandon the territories without any word of agreement or arrangement. They should realise they will get absolutely nothing without negotiations."

In other words, the territories — via the political and military oppression wrought and veiled by the closure — were to be held hostage until and unless the Palestinians came round to Israel's way of thinking at the peace talks.

As for human rights abuses, extrajudicial executions, the enduring illegality of occupation — these were to be converted into bargaining chips.

"You (the Palestinians) want to solve the problem," said Rabin in April. "The place to do that is around the negotiating table. So it is permissible for me to keep the territories closed as long as possible."

Let's do a deal

In May, Rabin announced that the separation of the territories from "sovereign Israel" would be indefinite. Attacks on Israelis inside the Green Line had dropped, even though armed attacks on the IDF within the territories continued.

At about the same time, Rabin signalled his readiness to do a deal on an "interim settlement" that could be tested in Gaza. "If you can find a Palestinian ready to negotiate about Gaza, let me know," he told one interviewer.

He wasn't kept waiting. Thanks to the canny midwifery of Norwegian foreign minister Jurgen Holst and his Israeli counterpart, Shimon Peres, Arafat delivered the *Gaza/Jericho First*

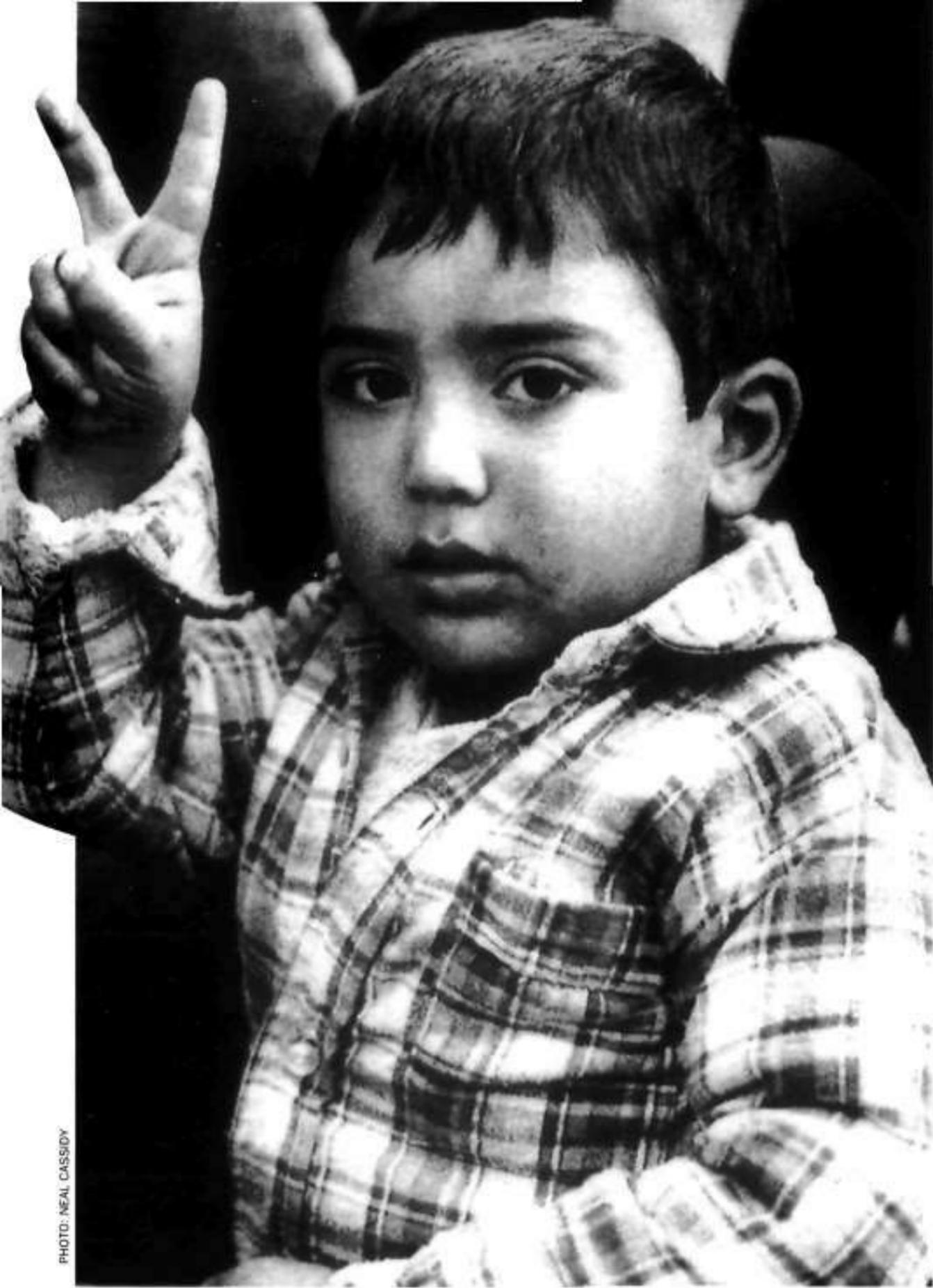


PHOTO: NEAL CASSIDY

■ **PEACE:** Even young Palestinians are divided on the merits of the new deal

plan. The rest is history.

But the victor is Rabin. He has translated Israel's near-hysteria of March 1993 into a mandate for his government to extricate itself from Gaza on its own terms.

What *Gaza/Jericho First* amounts to is autonomy in Gaza and Jericho, first. Recall that autonomy for the "Arab residents of the territories" is what Rabin's Labour Party has been advocating — and the PLO has historically rejected — ever since it was mooted at Camp David in September 1978.

Some support

Despite its flaws, several opinion polls show two-thirds of Gaza supports the accord. Given the severity of the occupation — compounded by an economic

siege that has catapulted unemployment to nearly 60% — this is hardly surprising. "Anything," people say here, "anything is better than what went before."

Yet there is a curious ambivalence, a kind of schizophrenia about the Gaza Strip. Palestinians celebrate deep into the night. They have their photos taken by jittery Israeli conscripts. All the while, a hushed rage smoulders. Periodically it explodes in the ugliest of forms.

On 12 September, three Israeli soldiers were ambushed and killed while patrolling east of Gaza Town. The next day, a Palestinian wired with explosives blew himself up as he entered a police station. Later that evening, another, decked in a national flag, approached a soldier in Gaza

Square. The soldier stretched out his hand and the Palestinian stabbed him. He was shot on sight.

Viscerally and psychologically, Gazans are at the crossroads. They could go either way.

Palestinian delegation chief Haider Abdl Shafi, who hails from Gaza, says: "I tell you plainly that the (peace) negotiations are not worth fighting about. The critical issue is transforming our society. Only once we achieve this will we be in a position of strength."

If the agreement provides enough political and civic space for Palestinians to set about renewing their institutions, democratising their life, mobilising around issues of social justice, then maybe something can be salvaged.

But if it augurs only an apartheid of separate political development shackled by Israeli economic domination, and the camps are torn down only to be replaced by ghettos, and the ghettos become the turf of rival militias, then "we may cease to exist as a people," says Abdl Shafi.

Don't ask

My visit to Numeirat ends at the house of Abu Musa. He is not the sort of Palestinian that Western journalists usually court in Gaza, being neither a bearded Islamist nor a stone-throwing youth.

Abu Musa is a fisherman and he is old — 60 years old. He has lived under the British, the Egyptians and the Israelis. He comes from Magdal, now called Ashkelon, and lost everything in 1948 when Israel was established.

Like many of his generation, he regained his national identity through work and education, putting three of his brothers through university. How does he feel about *Gaza/Jericho First*?

"I feel like a man who has lost a million dollars and been given ten." He pauses for a moment, then leans over to touch my arm.

"But you see, I lost the million dollars a long, long time ago. So I will keep the ten. We cannot go on the way we are. I accept, I accept. After so many rejections, I accept."

"But please don't ask me how I feel." ■