



Flash

Gaza's Surfer Girls

RIDING THE WAVES AND TESTING HAMAS'S LIMITS

By Sarah A. Topol



IMAGE CREDIT: SARAH A. TOPOL

AT DUSK, THE BEACH outside Gaza City is packed. Thousands of bodies cram the narrow Mediterranean shoreline, while bellowing touts ply candied apples, cotton candy, and baked yams. Rawand Abu Ghanem and I are sitting by the water.

The 13-year-old looks up at me from where she has been tracing patterns in the sand. "What do you wear when you swim in America?" she asks. I hesitate before replying, "Not much."

Rawand nods sagely. "When you surf in America, do people stare at you?"

"No," I answer.

"They do here," she sighs.

Rawand is one of four girls learning to ride the waves of the Gaza Strip. They are the newest members of the Gaza Surf Club, a community of two dozen surfers in the Palestinian coastal enclave of 1.5 million. We were supposed to surf together tonight, but Rawand took one look at the crowded beach and decided against it. "Too many people," she declared.

Sitting in her family's living room later, Rawand tries to explain: "It's a great feeling when I surf, but I won't surf when there are a lot of people around. It's so weird for them to see a girl surfing. It gets

crowded, and I just can't handle everybody looking at me."

A lifeguard's daughter, Rawand grew up watching her male relatives ride Gaza's waves; recently, she remembers, "I thought, *Okay, everybody's surfing, why shouldn't I?*"

But in a place where few women even swim, Rawand's adolescent reasoning carries complicated consequences. Since Hamas took control of the territory in 2007, the militant group has been working to inculcate conservative Islam in an already traditional society. As a result, the daughters of the strip's male surf community must navigate ever more treacherous waters.

"Our society is different than others, there's no way the girls can surf on a crowded day," says their surfing teacher, Al-Hindi Ashour. "To their parents they are still kids, but some people here look at them like adult females already ... They may say things about them in the future."

Rawand's cousin Shurouk Abu Ghanem is also 13. On land, she wears a hijab, the Muslim head scarf. In the water, Shurouk stuffs her long brown curls into a cap.

All of the girls surf clothed from head to foot. They prefer to practice in groups of other surfers and swimmers (their male cousins, brothers, and fathers), reasoning that the more people in the water, the less likely that anyone on shore will notice girls on a board.

"I'm not doing anything wrong. No one has the right to say anything to my daughters or me. But in the end, I can't live outside the traditions of my society. There are limits to where we can have our freedoms here," Rajab, Shurouk's father, tells me.

So the girls and their parents agree—they won't be able to surf after they turn 17. "Doing something only boys do means I'm unique. I'll go to another hobby—that's the way it works here," Rawand says. "But I will have the same confidence. I won't change."

Early the next morning, we enter the water en masse. Nine surfers share three boards. A phalanx of pint-size boys accompanies us on boogie boards, forming an army of attention-deflectors moving through the water together.

Next to me, Rawand squints, gulps air, and pushes her board down, surfacing on the other side of a wave. Nearby, Shurouk swims through the surf. We line up.

It's my turn on a windsurf board sans sail. And I'm up, adrenaline pumping, as I struggle to keep my balance in three layers of wet clothing (undergarments, a tank top tucked into spandex tights, and then a long-sleeved shirt and hiking pants on top of that). I have to bail to avoid the boogie-boarding boys—the downside of our protective detail—but it's enough. I'm the first adult woman anyone here has seen surf, and the pack beams in unison when I rejoin them.

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