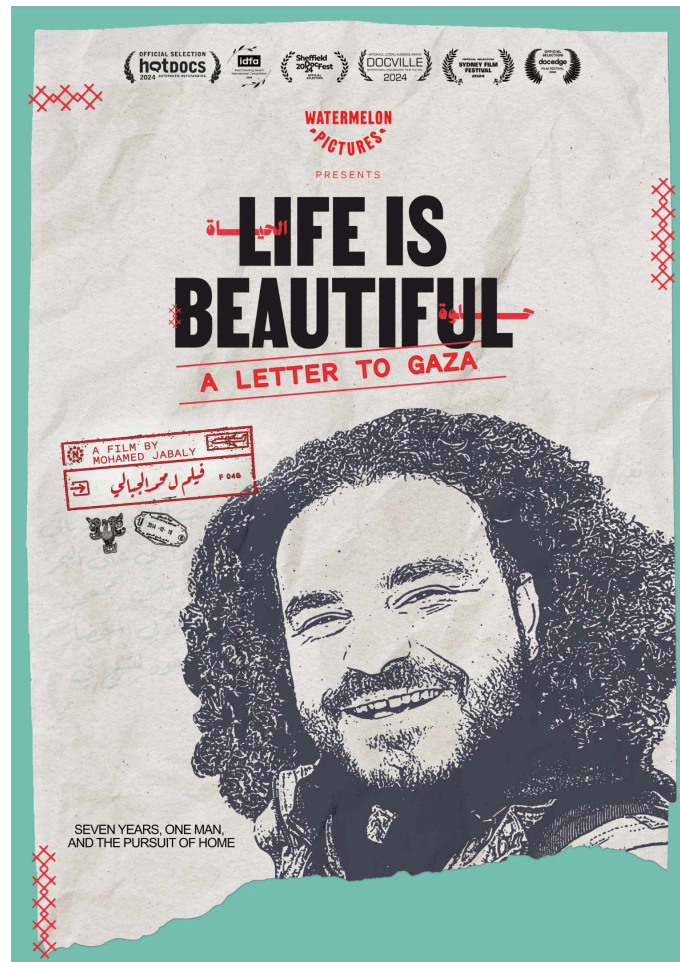




## LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL: A LETTER TO GAZA



### STUDY GUIDE

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## **Life Is Beautiful: A Letter to Gaza**

In 2014, Palestinian filmmaker Mohamed Jabaly was on an exchange in Norway when the borders of his home Gaza were closed. After the Gaza border was closed and the Norwegian government refused to accept his Palestinian passport, he was rendered stateless. The film captures his personal struggles with displacement, his efforts to continue his film career, and his enduring connection to his family and homeland.

### **About Gaza**

Gaza, or Gaza City, is a Palestinian city that is in the Gaza Strip. It is the largest and most populous city there, with a population of about 590,000. The Gaza Strip is an area located next to the Mediterranean Sea, Israel, and Egypt. It is one of the most densely populated places in the world, with a population of approximately 2.1 million living in an area that is about 140 square miles (363 square km) in size.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank—which is larger than the Gaza Strip and home to about 3 million Palestinians—are known as the State of Palestine. However, Palestine is only recognized as a state by some countries. Israel does not recognize it, and neither does the United States or the United Kingdom.

### **History**

The boundaries of Gaza were created after the 1948 Middle East war, when the State of Israel was also formed. The area was initially occupied by Egypt. In 1967, Egypt was pushed out of the Gaza Strip and the area was occupied by Israel, which built settlements there and used the military to rule the Palestinian population. In 2005, Israel withdrew both its settlements and troops. However, it kept control of its shared border, airspace, and shoreline, meaning that it still has control over the movement of people and goods in and out of the Gaza Strip. Egypt also tightly controls its border with the Gaza Strip.

### **Ongoing Conflict**

There is ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, and between Israel and the Gaza Strip specifically. In fact, this is one of the longest-running conflicts in the world. Since 2007, the Gaza Strip has been controlled by Hamas, which is a Palestinian military and political movement. Israel, the United States, and many other countries have designated Hamas as a terrorist organization. This is ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel. Most recently, in October 2023, it launched an attack on Israel, taking about 250 hostages and killing 1,200 people. In response, Israel launched a military attack where tens of thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip were killed. Conflict continued between Israel and the Gaza Strip and by the beginning of 2025 it was estimated that more than 40,000 Palestinians had been killed. In January 2025, Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire, but in March 2025, that was broken by attacks on the Gaza Strip.

### **Rafa Border Crossing**

The Rafa border crossing is located on the 7.5-mile border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip and is controlled by Egyptian authorities. The only other border crossings into the Gaza Strip—Erez, and

Kerem Shalom—are controlled by Israel. The Rafa border crossing is often closed, and even when it is open, people trying to cross face many restrictions. According to data provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, over the past ten years, the border was open for 1,463 days and closed for 1,915.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, 2008, 2016, 2017, and 2018, it was closed for almost all of the year.

## **Humanitarian Crisis in the Gaza Strip**

As a result of conflict, and border restrictions that prevent aid from getting in, the Gaza Strip is experiencing a humanitarian crisis. Many people do not have enough food or water and do not have access to proper sanitation, housing, power, or healthcare.

The situation became significantly worse following the 2023 attack. According to a recent report by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), a United Nations agency that was created in 1949 to help Palestinian refugees, “Basic humanitarian supplies, including food, fuel, medical aid and vaccines for children, are rapidly running out; UNRWA flour and food parcels have run out and over one third of essential medical supplies are already out of stock. This is having a devastating impact on the population, particularly on vulnerable groups including children, women and the elderly.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Palestinian Diaspora**

It is estimated that more than 6 million Palestinians live outside the region of Palestine, something often referred to as the “Palestinian Diaspora.” Many Palestinians were forced to flee from the area in 1948, when Israel was established. Since then, thousands more have been displaced as the result of ongoing conflict in the area.

These people live all over the world, but the majority are in the nearby countries of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. According to UNRWA, there are 2.39 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan.<sup>3</sup> This is the most of any country. Other countries with sizeable Palestinian populations include the United States, Chile, and the Gulf states. The treatment of these refugees varies by country. For example, in Jordan, Palestinian refugees generally enjoy a lot of rights and many are even citizens. In contrast, Lebanon is much more restrictive, limiting access to many public services.

In a Migration Policy Institute article, the authors explain that the Palestinian refugee population is unique because it includes all the descendants of the people who were originally displaced in 1948. This is not the usual method for calculating refugee populations. As a result, the authors state, “While the Palestinian refugee population has grown significantly over time, it has done so because of the descendants of people displaced decades ago, rather than new displacement.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ochaopt.org/data/crossings>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-171-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/palestinian-refugees-dispossession>

## About Tromsø

Tromsø is a town in northern Norway. It has a population of about 79,000, and is the largest city in northern Norway<sup>5</sup>. Tromsø is in the Arctic and has long winters and short summers. Because of how far north this city is, the sun does not set there from late May until late July. In 2001, Tromsø and Gaza City created a twin-city relationship.

## Study Questions

1. How does cooking help the filmmaker connect with home?
2. What other things does he do to retain his connection with Gaza?
3. How does the physical environment in Tromsø differ from that of Gaza?
4. How do you think the filmmaker's experience would have been different if he did not have friends in Tromsø ?
5. What do you think are some of the ways that this experience changed the filmmaker's life?

## Additional Resources

- BBC, "Israel and the Palestinians: History of the Conflict Explained," January 20, 2025.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44124396>
- CIA.gov, "The World Factbook: Gaza Strip," last updated May 14, 2025.  
<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/gaza-strip/>
- Nathan Citino, Ana Martín Gil, and Kelsey P. Norman, "Generations of Palestinian Refugees Face Protracted Displacement and Dispossession," Migration Policy Institute, May 3, 2023.  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/palestinian-refugees-dispossession>
- Safia K. Southey, "What's Next for the Palestinian Diaspora After Gaza?" American Society of International Law, May 7, 2025.  
<https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/29/issue/7>
- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, "Palestine Refugees."  
<https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>
- "Welcome to Tromsø – The Gateway to the Arctic."  
<https://tromso.kommune.no/en/node/20683>

## Contact

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<sup>5</sup> <https://tromso.kommune.no/en/node/20683>