

# *A Bottle in the Gaza Sea*



## **Teacher Resource Package**

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**Toronto Jewish  
Film Festival**

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**Synopsis:**

Country of Origin: France

Director: Thierry Binisti

Runtime: 99 minutes

Themes: Arab-Israeli Conflict, terrorism, war, coming of age, overcoming stereotypes

Tal, a teenager whose family has moved from Paris to Jerusalem, is jolted out of her comfortable, middle class existence after she experiences a terrorist attack at her local café. Refusing to succumb to hatred and blame, she optimistically slips a message of peace in a bottle that she asks her brother to throw into the sea while he is on patrol near Gaza. Eventually, she receives an email response from Naim, a teenaged Palestinian who calls himself Gazaman. Though he initially responds to exchanges. Based on the novel by Valerie Zenatti, the film takes an even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by highlighting its effects on those poised on the brink of adulthood. Avoiding any trace of sentimentality or offering easy answers, the film explores the price that Tal and Naim's tentative friendship exacts within their respective communities.

**Curriculum Links**

A Bottle in the Gaza Sea can be used to meet the Writing and Media Studies component of the English curriculum from Grades 7 through to 12. It can also be used as part of the Grade 12 Canadian and World Politics course (CPW4U).

**Related Texts**

A Bottle in the Gaza Sea is based on the novel of the same name by Valerie Zenatti, published by Bloomsbury Publishing PLC. It is available on Amazon at

<http://www.amazon.ca/Bottle-Gaza-Sea-Valerie-Zenatti/dp/1599902001>

## Ways into the Text: Historical and Political Context

Based on a young adult novel, *A Bottle in the Gaza Sea* explores the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict in a manner that is accessible to teenagers. Though the novel and film are both works of fiction, the political context in which they are set and the events that they refer to are all too real. In order for students to better understand either text, they should first have some understanding of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, particularly of the events leading up to the 2008 war in Gaza.

Listed below is a brief outline of the events leading up to and following the War. However, students should do their own research on the subject and include a variety of different sources and perspectives in order for them to get a better sense of how accounts of the conflict differ dramatically depending on the perspective of the writer. Indeed, even the names given to the conflict by each side are indicative of this clash of perceptions. In Israel, the war is known as Operation Cast Lead, while in Gaza it is referred to as the Gaza Massacre or Battle of al-Furqan (the Criterion). Teachers should ask students to begin their research by exploring the significance of each of these names.

**Brief Timeline of Gaza Conflict (Source: <http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/09/breaking-down-barriers/>)**

The Gaza Strip is a rectangle along the Mediterranean coast between Israel and Egypt. The majority of its approximately 1.4 million residents are Palestinian refugees, many of whom have been living in refugee camps for decades; 80 percent were estimated to be living in poverty in mid-2007.

Under the Oslo peace accords signed in 1993, Gaza was turned over to the newly created Palestinian Authority, to form one wing of an emerging Palestinian state, along with the West Bank and a potential land corridor between them. But two different parties rule these two regions—the militant Hamas controlled Gaza and Fatah ruled the West Bank. Many Israeli settlers remained in Gaza.

In September 2005 the Israeli prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, withdrew all Israeli settlers from Gaza, making it the first territory completely in Palestinian hands. Israel, however, kept tight control over all border crossings and continued to conduct raids.

In January 2006, Hamas won a surprise victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, ousting the Fatah government. Then in a burst of fighting in June 2007 in which more than 100 people were killed, Hamas gunmen routed the Fatah forces, and seized control of Gaza outright. Israel, which had refused to recognize the Hamas government, responded by clamping down even tighter on the flow of goods and people in and out of the territories.

By June 2008, Hamas and Israel were both ready to reach some sort of accommodation, and the six-month truce was declared, although never formally defined. Their job, the Hamas officials said, was to stop rocket attacks on Israel not only from its own armed groups, but also from others based in Gaza, including Islamic Jihad and Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades. It took some days, but they were largely successful. Hamas imposed its will and even imprisoned some of those who were firing rockets. But the goods shipments, while up some 25 to 30 percent and including a mix of more items, never began to approach what Hamas thought it was going to get. Israel said it planned to increase the shipments in stages, and noted that the rockets never stopped completely.

After the truce lapsed on Dec. 19, rocket firing stepped up quickly, and Israeli air strikes soon followed. The death toll on the first day was estimated at 225; by Dec. 29, it had topped 300. On Jan. 3, a land invasion of Gaza began, and by Jan. 8, the death toll was 660.

### **Aftermath**

The conflict resulted in over 1000 Palestinian casualties. In September 2009, a UN special mission headed by Justice Richard Goldstone, a South African judge, released a contentious report accusing both the Palestinian militants and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) of war crimes and crimes and possible crimes against humanity. The report recommended bringing charges against those responsible ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8257301.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8257301.stm)). In January 2010, the Israeli government released their response to the report, disputing its findings ([Gaza Operation Investigation: An Update](#), MFA, January, 2010). In 2011, Goldstone published an article in the Washington Post retracting his earlier assertion that the Israelis intentionally targeted Palestinian civilians ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC_story.html)). The other authors of the report, Hina Jilani, Christine Chinkin and Desmond Travers rejected Goldstone's reassessment and published their dissenting opinion in The Guardian newspaper in April, 2011 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/14/goldstone-report-statement-un-gaza>).

### **Related Activities**

Divide students into three groups and assign one media outlet per group:

CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2008/news/gaza/>

Al Jazeera: [http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/war\\_on\\_gaza/](http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/war_on_gaza/)

IDF: <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/opcast/default.htm>

Each group should read the materials on each site, answering the questions below. Afterwards, they should present their findings to the class:

1. Draw up a timeline of events based on the articles posted on the website.
2. What photos/images are included in the articles? What response do they elicit

- in the viewer?
3. Based on what you have read, how would you describe the actions of the Israelis? How would you describe the actions of the Palestinians?
  4. Can you detect a bias in the reporting? If so, how? Refer to specific examples.

After each group presents their work, the class should discuss the differences in the way each of these sources presented the conflict. Listed below are some discussion questions to think about:

1. What are the differences in the timelines? Are there any differences in the facts that are presented or in the way that they are presented? Be specific and provide examples.
2. What are the differences in the way that each outlet depicts the Israelis and the Palestinians?
3. Can a conflict be covered in a neutral manner? Why? Why not? Do you think parties that aren't directly involved in the conflict (e.g. Canadians, Americans, British) are likely to be less biased in their coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict? Why? Why not?

### **Extension Activity**

Students could research the Goldstone Report as well as Goldstone's later retraction and the reaction of the other authors to his change of heart. Links to each are listed below:

Goldstone Report:

[http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/specialsession/9/docs/UNFFMGC\\_Report.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/specialsession/9/docs/UNFFMGC_Report.pdf)

Goldstone reconsiders: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC_story.html)

Reaction: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/14/goldstone-report-statement-un-gaza>

What is the basis of Goldstone's change of heart? How do his fellow authors of the report challenge his reasoning? Whose argument do you find more convincing? Why?

## **Novel to Film**

A Bottle in the Gaza Sea is based on the novel of the same name by Valerie Zenatti. It is an updated version of an epistolary novel; instead of exchanging letters, the two central characters communicate via emails. Translating these written exchanges into cinematic language raises particular challenges and students should consider the ways in which the director has interpreted the novel to a visual medium.

## **Questions**

1. What purpose does the voice over reading the emails serve? What is going on in the background as the emails are being voiced and how does this reinforce what is being written?
2. Secondary characters such as family members and friends are developed more in the film than they are in the novel. Why do you think they have been given a larger role? What function do these characters serve and how do they reinforce the central themes of the story?
3. How does the filmmaker visually convey the tension that both the Israelis and the Palestinians live with on a daily basis?
4. How are acts of terrorism and acts of war depicted onscreen? Why do you think that the director chooses to convey the terrorist attack at the beginning of the film with only sounds against a black background? Do you think this is effective technique? Why/why not?

## **Setting: Jerusalem and Gaza**

Understanding the setting where story takes place and the conditions under which the characters live is central to the understanding of the characters themselves. Students should fill out the chart on the next page, comparing where and how Tal and Naim live. How do these differences contribute to their different perspectives on the future?

<b>Setting</b>	<b>Jerusalem</b>	<b>Gaza</b>
Family home and personal living spaces		
Recreational spaces and activities available		
Educational facilities and opportunities available		
Security conditions/threat of imminent danger		
Infrastructure (roads, utilities, etc.)		

## **Characters**

Both Tal and Naim appear at first to fit into distinct stereotypes: she is a privileged, sheltered teenager with naive ideas about the prospect of peace, while he is a disaffected young man whose experience living under occupation has left him cynical about the possibility of a peaceful solution. As their correspondence continues, both of them undergo significant changes in outlook and they become more believable as characters.

### **Tal: Focus Questions/Activities**

1. How does Tal change as a result of her friendship with Naim? Refer to specific examples where he challenges her worldview.
2. Why does Tal continue to write to Naim even after his first responses are so hostile to her?
3. How does Tal's relationship with her parents and her brother change as a result of her friendship with Naim? Refer to specific examples.
4. Why does Tal decide to pierce her lip? Her father says that "instead of acting the rebel... that piercing of [hers] is a real act of submission. Like the way they branded slaves." What does he mean by this?
5. Why does Tal lie to her brother when he first asks her if she got a response to the letter in the bottle?
6. Why does Tal not tell her friend Efrat about Naim? What is Efrat's reaction when she does find out?
7. Why does Tal break up with her boyfriend even though a relationship with Naim would be impossible?
8. Tal claims that "knowing [Naim] did [her] good and it hurt [her], too. What does she mean by this?

### **Naim: Focus Questions/Activities**

1. How does Naim change as a result of his friendship with Tal? Draw a chart outlining the progression of his attitude towards her throughout their communication.
2. Do you think that their relationship would have blossomed had Tal not been born in France? Why/why not?



3. Why does Naim bother to respond to Tal's message in a bottle in the first place?
4. How does Naim's correspondence with Tal affect his relationships with family and friends?

Criteria	Rating 5=Great 1=Poor					Comments
<b>Factual Elements</b>						
Depictions of Israelis						
Depiction of Palestinians						
<b>Story Elements</b>						
Character believability						
Character development						
Development of friendship between Tal and Naim						
Secondary Characters						
Dialogue/screenplay						
Emotional Impact						
Overall interest level						
<b>Technical Elements</b>						
Cinematography						
Music						
Editing						

5. How does being accused of being an informant affect Naim? Why does he not cut off all communication with Tal afterwards?
6. Naim's uncle accuses him of "not doing anything constructive with [his] life, only turning into a dreamer like [his] parents." Do you agree with this? Why/why not? Why is Naim's uncle so upset by his interest in learning French?
7. What qualities does Naim's family share with Tal's? In what ways are they different?

8. Naim tells Tal that “nothing is easy between [them] but everything is possible.” What does he mean by this? Do you agree? Why/why not?

### **Activity: Film Review**

Write a film review of *Bottle in the Gaza Sea* using the chart below to think about the qualities of a film that you need to consider when writing a review.

### **General Discussion Questions/Activities**

1. Compare and contrast Tal's life in Israel with Naim's life in Gaza. Refer to specific examples from the film. Apart from the obvious economic disparity, what are the differences in their cultures and the opportunities that are available to them?
2. Create a timeline of events charting the progress of Tal and Naim's relationship from their initial contact to their last correspondence. What causes them to shift their initial opinions of each other? What obstacles are put in the way of their budding friendship?
3. The film begins with a terrorist attack that we only hear. Why do you think that the director chose to convey the bombing without any images? Do you think this is an effective device? Why/why not?
4. Tal and her classmates go on an excursion to Masada. Research the history of Masada and explain how its historical significance is relevant to the issues raised in the film.
5. Tal insists that she and her friend get off the bus when she sees an Arab man holding a package. Her Israeli-born friend tells her that it is only “being French” that makes her panic like that. What does she mean?
6. Why do Hamas militants detain and beat Naim? Why is his uncle suspicious and resentful of his learning French?
7. The director follows a scene of Tal celebrating New Year's Eve with her friends to Naim getting ready for his cousin's arranged marriage celebrations. Discuss the cultural differences between the Israelis and Palestinians to dating and marriage. What are the benefits and drawbacks to both of these approaches?
8. Tal emails Naim about her experience attending a memorial concert for Yitzhak Rabin. Who was Yitzhak Rabin and how is his death significant to the themes raised in the film?
9. How does the director show the impact of the Gaza War on both the Israelis and the Palestinians? Refer to specific examples in the film. Do you think that the director is even handed in his portrayal of both sides of the conflict? Why/why not. Refer to specific examples in the film.
10. Discuss the end of the film. Do you think it is effective? Why/why not?

## References

(All websites cited are from April, 2012)

<http://www.amazon.ca/Bottle-Gaza-Sea-Valerie-Zenatti/dp/1599902001>

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/09/breaking-down-barriers/>

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8257301.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8257301.stm)

[Gaza Operation Investigation: An Update](#), MFA, January, 2010)

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC_story.html)

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