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Cameras and Kuffiyehs: Palestine's video resistance

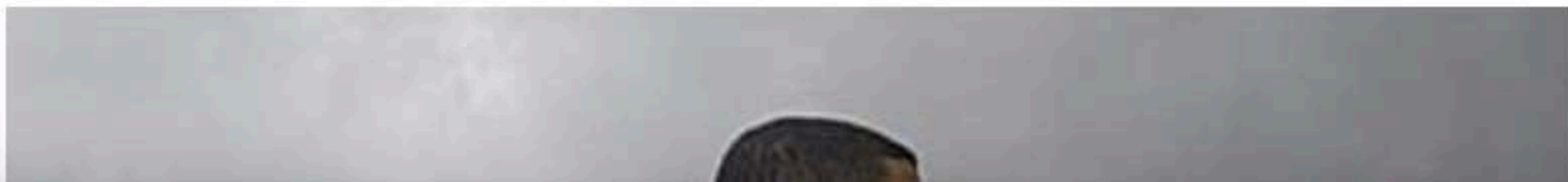
Young Palestinians have been using cameras to document abuses and misconduct by Israeli forces near the West Bank village of Ni'lin. What has emerged is a generation of talented filmmakers fluent in editing and visual storytelling.



Don Duncan

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EDITOR'S PICKS



Arafat Kanaan, 17, founder of Ni'lin Media Group, says his camera is like a weapon.

NI'LIN, WEST BANK // Every Friday, the slingshot-wielding boys of the West Bank village of Ni'lin make their way to protests at the Israeli-constructed separation wall, which has deprived the village of 300 hectares of its farmland. But weaving among the boys, or shabab, are other youngsters with a different weapon of choice - video cameras. For the past three years, the Israeli human rights NGO, B'Tselem, has been providing cameras and training to young Palestinians as part of its "Shooting Back" project - a bid to document and collect hard video evidence of abuses and misconduct by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Israeli settlers in the West Bank.



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Today, there are 150 cameras all over the West Bank and Gaza for this purpose and most of the footage captured - some 1,500 hours so far - ends up on the floor-to-ceiling archive shelves in the Jerusalem office of Yoav Gross who directs the NGO's video project. Several pieces of footage captured by B'Tselem's camera volunteers have served as key evidence, instrumental in Israeli court rulings in favour of Palestinian plaintiffs.

The presence of cameras, now on both Palestinian and Israeli sides, has also served as a deterrent to violence and abuse. But three years after launching the project, B'Tselem has seen another, unintended consequence of its deployment of cameras to Palestinian youth. "People started to take this tool, the video camera, and use it as a way to express themselves, to tell stories," said Mr Gross. "We didn't train them to do that. We trained them to document human rights violations. But pretty soon we got the sense that this can be a powerful tool for them to empower themselves."

What has emerged is a generation of young Palestinian filmmakers, who are at ease with the camera and are becoming fluent in editing and the language of visual storytelling. Back at a Ni'lin protest on a recent Friday afternoon, Arafat Kanaan, 17, decided to leave his camera at home and stood back from the protest. He had been detained by the IDF the previous week and, obscuring half of his face with a piece of cardboard. He has to worry about cameras too - IDF ones.

"The camera is like a weapon for us," he said. "It can display and show everyone in the world what is the truth." His sister Salam, 19, was one of the volunteers to capture IDF misconduct - the shooting of a handcuffed Palestinian detainee in Ni'lin - that led to the successful prosecution of



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an Israeli soldier. Together with Salam and a friend, Rasheed Amira, 17, Arafat has set up Ni'lin Media Group, which produces weekly video packages of each protest and longer form documentary-style videos on life under occupation. He posts them to the group's youtube channel (www.youtube.com/user/NilinMediaGroup) and screens the films to the community on Ni'lin's central square.

"We collect ourselves into a group because it gives us the power to continue the work and to train others," said Arafat. The evolution from straight documentation to complex storytelling is evident elsewhere. Seventeen-year-old Diaa Hadad, a Palestinian who lives in the Jewish-settled H2 sector of Hebron, wanted to show the effects of settlement and IDF sanctions on Palestinian movement in the sector. He chose to do so through a one minute film called H1H2. The film is a split screen. On the right half is the bustling market street of Bab a-Zawiya, in the Palestinian-dominated H1 sector of the town. On the left side is a-Shuhada street in H2, once a similarly busy market street for Palestinians, but now utterly empty due to Israeli restrictions and settler violence.

"I made this film to show the people outside what is happening here," Diaa said, sitting on a wall outside HEB2, a community media centre for Palestinians in H2. "We are living here and a lot of incidents occur here and nobody knows what is happening, even people from Bab a-Zawiya, two kilometres away, in H1." Behind him lies the landscape of occupation he is trying to document. Numerous army CCTV cameras silently monitoring the contested territory, IDF watch towers, and the barbed wires of settlement demarcation.

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"We give the audience the full picture of what is happening here in the West Bank - violations, normal life, occupation, normal life - and what is the connection between the occupation and normal life. This is very important," said Issa Amro, 30, director of HEB2, which, drawing on Hebron's new class of video-adept youth, has launched a community television service streaming live on www.heb2.tv. "If you keep showing settlers throwing stones at a certain family, then you don't know how this family is living," said Mr Amro. "If you show how this family is living, you become connected to them in another way and you care about them personally."

It is exactly this philosophy that is driving grass roots filmmaking in Gaza, a territory with no Israeli army or settler presence within the strip. The challenge facing Gaza's young filmmakers is the siege - on information - leaving the territory. "The films we are making in Gaza are so important because the world media is not focused on the details on the ground, the real life here," said Mohammed al Majdalawi, 22, via telephone from Gaza. He recently made a short documentary about the Gazan hip-hop scene.

"There are no Israeli journalists allowed to go inside [the strip]," said Mr Gross of B'Tselem, "which basically leaves the Israeli public with a very shallow image of what goes on inside Gaza. This sense of a very humane existence in Gaza has kind of disappeared from Israeli discourse." That's starting to change. Mr al Majdalawi's work was one of five such films from Gaza published recently by Israel's number one news site Ynet.com, read by up to one million Israelis every day. Other films featured on the site showed the children workers of Gaza's supply tunnels, the video game craze that has gripped the strip, and a play camp for children.

Back at the wall in Ni'lin, the protest unfurls as expected. Like every Friday, the shabab have poised themselves behind the wall while the protesters make their way through an opening in it to yell and wave banners at the IDF stationed behind jeeps on the other side of a barbed wire fence. Now it is time for the Ni'lin shabab to launch their barrage of rocks. The air is taken over with the whirrs and whizzes of rocks flying across the seven metre high wall.

During the first and second intifadas, the shabab gained iconic status, a dramatic manifestation of the David and Goliath proportions of the wider struggle. Today, the "video shabab", a growing, non-violent clique who command an increasing access to powerful technologies and means of distribution, are providing stiff competition. After a few minutes of orders in Hebrew, delivered in vain from the other side of the wall, the IDF sends over round after round of tear gas, scattering the shabab and the clutch of activists gathered, up the rocky hills of Ni'lin. The video volunteers remain, donning their gas mask, shooting through the haze.

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