

Opinion | I.H.T. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Shooting Back, With Video

By DON DUNCAN AUG. 6, 2010

Every Friday, the slingshot-wielding boys, or shabab, of the West Bank village of Ni'lin hold a demonstration at Israel's separation wall, which has deprived the village of 750 acres of farmland. But among the shabab are other youngsters with a different weapon — video cameras.

For the past three years, Btselem, the Israeli human rights organization, has provided cameras and training to young Palestinians as part of its project to collect video evidence of abuses and misconduct by the Israel Defense Forces and Israeli settlers in the West Bank. There are 150 such cameras all over the West Bank and Gaza, and most of the footage captured so far — some 1,500 hours — ends on the floor-to-ceiling archive shelves of the Jerusalem office of Yoav Gross, who directs the nongovernmental organization's video project.

Footage captured by Btselem's volunteers has been key evidence in Israeli court rulings in favor of Palestinian plaintiffs. The presence of cameras, now on both Palestinian and Israeli sides, has deterred violence and abuse. But three years after launching the project, Btselem has seen another, unintended consequence. "People started to take this tool, the video camera, and use it as a way to express themselves, to tell stories," said 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, at ease with the camera and fluent in editing and the language of visual storytelling.

At a Ni'lin protest one recent Friday afternoon, Arafat Kanaan, 17, stood back, obscuring half of his face from IDF cameras with a piece of cardboard. He

had been detained by the Israelis the previous week and decided to leave his camera at home. “The camera is like a weapon for us,” he said. “It can show everyone in the world what the truth is.”

It was Arafat’s sister Salam, 19, whose videotape of an incident involving a handcuffed Palestinian detainee in Ni’lin led to the successful prosecution of an Israeli soldier.

Together with Salam and Rasheed Amira, 17, Arafat has set up the Ni’lin Media Group, which produces weekly videos of the protests and documentaries on life under occupation. He posts them on the group’s YouTube channel and screens the films for 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 documentation to storytelling is evident elsewhere. Diaa Hadad, 17, a Palestinian who lives in the H2 sector of Hebron, wanted to show the effects of Israeli settlement and IDF sanctions on the Palestinians there, and did so in a one-minute film called “H1H2.” The film uses a split screen. On the right is the bustling market street of Bab al-Zawiya, in the Palestinian-dominated H1 sector of the town. On the left is al-Shuhada street in H2, once a busy market for Palestinians but now empty due to Israeli restrictions and settler violence.

“I made this film to show the people outside what is happening here,” Diaa said, speaking outside HEB2, a community media center. “A lot of incidents occur here and nobody knows what is happening.”

Behind him lay the landscape of occupation: army closed-circuit TV cameras that monitor the contested territory, IDF watchtowers and the barbed wire of settlement demarcation.

Issa Amro, the 30-year-old director of the community center, says HEB2 has launched a live community television service on www.heb2.tv. “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,” he said.

“If you keep showing settlers throwing stones at a certain family, then you don’t know how this family is living,” he added. “If you show how this family is

living, you become connected to them in another way and you care about them personally.”

This philosophy is also driving grassroots filmmaking in Gaza, where there is no Israeli Army or settler presence but remains cut off by the siege, which stymies the flow of information.

“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, speaking by telephone from Gaza, where he recently made a short documentary about the local hip-hop scene.

Yoav Gross, the video project director, points out that because Israeli journalists are not allowed to enter the Gaza Strip, the Israeli public is left “with a very shallow image” of what goes on there. “This sense of a very human existence in Gaza has kind of disappeared from Israeli discourse,” he said.

That’s starting to change. Al-Majdalawi’s work was one of five films from Gaza made available recently by Israel’s prominent news site Ynet.com, used by a million Israelis every day. Other films on the site showed the child workers of Gaza’s supply tunnels, the video game craze that has gripped the strip, and a play camp for children.

Meanwhile, the protests continue at the wall in Ni’lin, with demonstrators shouting slogans, the shabab throwing rocks, and the troops of the IDF firing tear gas. As the protesters scatter in the rocky hills, the video volunteers put on their gas masks, and kept operating their cameras, despite the haze.

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