

Budrus – a success story

BY ALEXA DALBY

A FAMILY MAN SITS IN THE GARDEN OF his home and looks at the camera calmly: “We don’t have time for wars. We want to raise our kids in peace and hope. We are using a strategy of popular resistance and nonviolence.”

Ayed Morrar is a community leader in the small Palestinian village of Budrus, 31km from Ramallah. He is also the unassuming hero of a remarkable documentary film, *Budrus*, which narrates the story of six years in the life of the village’s 1,500 inhabitants as they campaign to prevent an Israeli security fence being built around their village. Instead of following the existing Green Line, the planned route of the Separation Barrier loops away from it, surrounding Budrus and isolating it from its land – in the process confiscating 300 acres and 3,000 olive trees, and cutting through its cemetery.

Ayed describes the closeness of the people to the land and to their olive trees. The villagers rely on their olive harvest and the trees are cared for as tenderly as children. Although he understands the right of any country to ensure its security, he questions Israel’s right to build the fence on its neighbour’s land, outside current Israeli borders.

The film draws on many sources of footage, both shot on the ground by protesters and clips from Israeli television, and extraordinarily open interviews with voices from both sides. Film industry ‘bible’ *Variety* praised it for its “even-handedness”. Its US-based director Julia Bacha says, “It was very important for us to tell the story from the point of view also of the border police and the army.” And so Israeli Captain Doron Spielman explains that the purpose of the fence is to prevent the entry of suicide bombers from the West Bank: “Security trumps everything.” The effect of the fence on

Budrus is “extremely unfortunate”, but, he says, “it is less unfortunate than the death of an Israeli civilian.”

As the bulldozers move in, trees are uprooted to die on the razed earth. “We have given those trees the names of our mothers,” says Ayed. “For 50 years I have been watering these olive trees, if they uproot them, they have to uproot me too,” avows an elderly woman. Ayed urges villagers to empty their minds of traditional thinking, and not to accept this as fate, but see it as injustice that must be challenged nonviolently.

The villagers, adults and children, start to demonstrate against the bulldozers: Ayed says: “All our activities are peaceful. We stood there the entire day until we made sure there would be no construction work.” Israeli Border police reinforcements arrive, headed by the glamorous Yasmine Levy: “We were given instructions not to damage anything, but there was no choice but to put up the fence.” Now looking back, she says, “As combatants we didn’t know all the implications and problems. We were like robots.”

Demonstrations continue. Ayed’s daughter Iltezam, 15 then and now training to be a doctor, asks her father why no women were involved. From then on, marches included both men and women. Levy believed that putting women at the front was a tactic to prevent them using violence. The women gave her a hard time, appealing to her as a woman to leave the border patrol and join

them. Iltezam herself became a human shield. “I don’t know what happened but I suddenly found myself behind the line of soldiers and facing the bulldozer. I asked myself, what can one person do? I jumped in the hole.” There’s footage of her climbing into the trench. “I was completely terrified. The soldiers could do nothing except take the bulldozer and go away.”

Side by side

Ayed sought participation from all Palestinian political parties and organisations, as well as international and Israeli activists – the first time this has happened. Ahmed Awwad, local Hamas member and teacher, supported Ayed’s nonviolent approach and comments: “I saw Israelis defending me from the soldiers of the occupation. It was strange to see a Jew standing side by side with me.” Iltezam says, “Now I know that not all Israel-

is are the same. Some of them think that we should live together in peace. I did not think that one day I would have Israeli friends.” Bacha comments, “Budrus was one of the first villages where Israelis started crossing the Green Line and demonstrating actively with Palestinians. For the border police, it’s a big surprise when they’re supposed to be on enemy territory and start hearing Hebrew and people from their communities.”

The demonstrators’ chanting and clapping is so infectious that an Israeli soldier can’t help nodding his head in time to the rhythm. Bacha comments, “This is a short but great moment in the film since it shows how non-violent resistance can change the dynamic between the soldiers and the demonstrators away from the usual “us versus them”. When soldiers are faced with a nonviolent movement, they are less likely to feel threatened and can reflect on demonstrators’ grievances,

even if they ultimately employ violence.”

The village is put under curfew, the soldiers move in, arrests are made and live bullets are fired. Ten months and 53 unarmed demonstrations go by. Then, at last, Israeli television news announces that the route of the Wall around Budrus will be changed and the Separation Barrier will move back towards the Green Line. The cemetery and 95% of the land have been saved.

International awareness

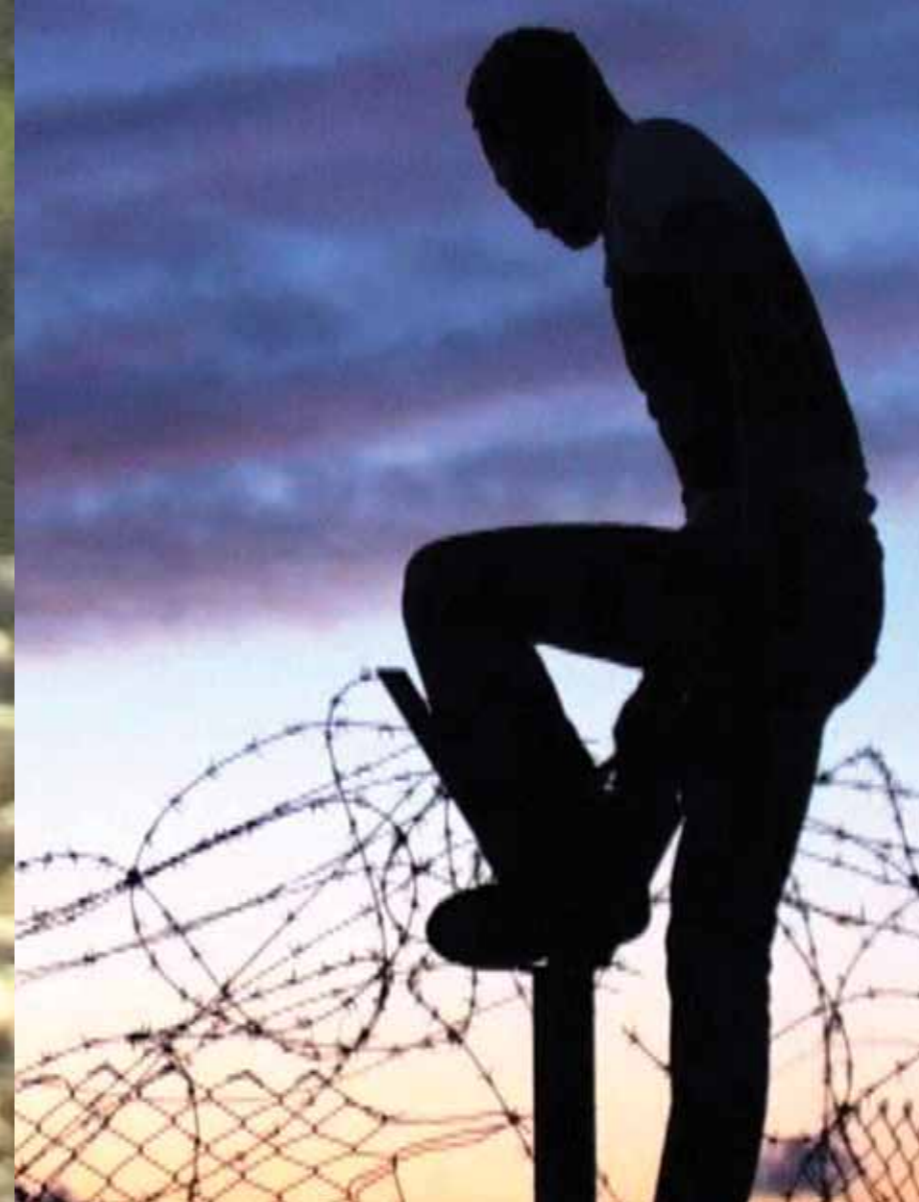
Bacha says, “I wanted to tell a story of success, where civilians had actually managed to unite and create change by their own efforts ... The decision to present it as a success was based on how Ayed and the villagers saw it.” The film was shot over six years and is a collage of the work of over a dozen people – Israelis, Palestinians, international activists as well as Bacha herself: “We had 250 hours of material, which we had to cut down to 78 minutes. We took 10 months to edit it. Our amazing editor Geeta Gandbhir really managed to bring it to life and make the film sing.”

The film won an award at the Berlin film festival and was screened in the UK and in the US as part of the Tribeca International Film Festival. Its screening at the Dubai International Film festival was endorsed by Queen Noor of Jordan who spoke about the power of films like *Budrus* to combat stereotypes: “It gives an enormous amount of hope ... It’s a story which will have an impact and can help bring change.”

The first chance for Israeli audiences to see the film will be at its premiere in Israel at the Jerusalem International Film Festival in July. Bacha says, “While the film was being edited, we did screenings for Israeli target groups and had a very wide range of responses, but most overwhelmingly it’s one of surprise that they hadn’t been told this story. They’d never heard of this village; they never knew that there were Hamas members advocating nonviolence and they had never seen Palestinian women on the front lines.”

Bacha also won awards for her previous documentary *Encounter Point*. “Ultimately I’m a documentary film maker and I want the film to stand as a work of art, but at the same time, I’m more than happy if the village leaders and the people who are engaged in this struggle think they can use it as a tool to inspire people to get engaged. And we would like to encourage the public to request from their media outlets that these issues be covered more often since the nonviolence resistance movement can only grow if there is international awareness of it.” ■

For info on *Budrus*: www.justvision.org



Protests by day and by night: Iltezam, Ayed Morrar’s daughter (left), who empowered other women to march, and the fence that threatened to encircle the village of Budrus (right)

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