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Photo by: The Media Line

Palestinian artist chips away at the wall

By DIANA ATALLAH/THE MEDIA LINE
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Khaled Jarrar hopes that one day Palestinians will sell pieces of the barrier like Germans in Berlin.

In a small gallery in an ancient house in the village of Kalandiya, between Ramallah and Jerusalem, Khaled Jarrar stands alongside his latest art project placed on a podium: a small soccer ball made of cement. But not just any cement – this cement had been cut out of the barrier built by Israel separating the West Bank from Israel.

For the Palestinian artist, a 36-year-old father of two, the Israeli-built structure – known to Israel's critics by the ten-percent portion of the 435-mile structure where it manifests as a 26-foot tall concrete wall -- is simply an act of oppression that he wants to resist through art.

As adults and children stare at and touch the ball in amazement, a film called "Concrete" rolls in the background of Jarrar's corner at the Kalandiya International Art Festival, a two-week series of events held in several West Bank cities during November.

The film shows Jarrar – a tall man – chipping away at the wall on a hot day using simple tools, then collecting the pieces. Finally, it shows a photo of the finished project. Some congratulate the artist on his idea while others approach him with questions about how, where and why he carried out his project.

Jarrar explained that he cut the pieces of concrete from the wall one hot August day in Bir Nabal, a West Bank town northeast of Jerusalem, from an area of the structure alongside a drawing of a heart and the

name, "Thaer." "I found the heart and the name, and they looked interesting to me," he says.

Jarrar worked quickly and cautiously as he harvested the material would become his work of art. "I looked for a section of the wall that doesn't have high security towers or cameras."

In 20 minutes, he had removed the wall parts as his friends documented the process by video.

A controversial barrier

Ten years ago, Israel started building the barrier at the height of the Second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising, for which the suicide bomber became the symbol following dozens of attacks carried out by Palestinians against Israeli targets.

Palestinians charge that the barrier has been used to annex Palestinian lands and isolate Palestinians from their relatives, neighbors and farm land. The route of the barrier holds mostly along the Green Line, the 1949 Armistice line that until the 1967 war marked the borders of Israeli and Arab lands. The Palestinians claim all of the land inside the pre-1967 borders and reject any alterations that confiscate chunks of territory east of the line. The Palestinians define their state-to-be as including the entire West Bank, the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, which they insist will serve as the Palestinian capital.

Among Israelis, even those who opposed the barrier in principle agree it has prevented infiltration by terrorists, pointing to an overwhelming reduction in bombings since construction of the fence began.

The 480-mile long barrier is technically still under construction, although the construction has almost stopped on the ground with fewer attackers and several court-ordered building halts.

“Around 13% of the barrier is a 8-12-meter [26-foot] high grey cement wall with military watchtowers that are built in inhabited areas with sizeable populations or in close proximity, preventing them from overseeing the areas behind the wall,” said Issa Zboun, director of Geo-Informatics unit at Arij Applied Research Institute in Jerusalem.

Zboun told The Media Line that 90% of the barrier is a double-layered structure reinforced with barbed wire, trenches, military roads and a 4-5 meter [12-15 feet] high electrified metal fence equipped with security surveillance cameras. Zboun added that Palestinians are prohibited from building within 200 meters of the barrier on the Palestinian side, and that some communities are left isolated from the West Bank and do not have access to Israel.

“The Wall Must Fall” has become a common slogan in demonstrations in the West Bank. Some Palestinian villages such as Bil’in, Ni’ilin and Ma’sara arrange weekly demonstrations against the barrier where confrontations with the Israeli army regularly occur. In 2009, residents of the village of Budrus on the outskirts

of Ramallah succeeded in altering the barrier’s route as the villagers participated in almost daily protests to prevent the Israeli authorities from building it through their lands.

An artistic protest

Jarrar suggests that his project is the first attempt by a Palestinian to recycle the wall. “It’s actually ‘up-cycling’ because you elevate it into something better,” he says.

The first soccer ball he made was sold at the FIAC contemporary art fair in Paris in October, which Jarrar credits with planting the seed of his creativity: an invitation to participate in FIAC’s object-themed event. Jarrar was at home when the idea hit him. “My son was playing with his small soccer ball, and I asked him to give it to me.” In his studio near his house, he made the pieces smaller, added new cement, and then opened the soccer ball and poured the mixture into it.

“I was very anxious that night and couldn’t wait for the mixture to dry. I thought I might not make it because I only had three days before the travel time. But when I peeled the covers from the ball I knew I had succeeded. I covered the ball with newspapers and put it in my luggage on my way out of the country through the Allenby crossing to Jordan.”

“A source of separation can become a source of unity,” he said in explanation of his concept. “I thought I need to cut parts off the wall because it is an influential object in our lives, but cutting pieces from the wall wasn’t creative enough,” Jarrar told The Media Line.

“Maybe it’s dangerous”, he said, hesitantly. “I don’t know - I think it’s ok to be afraid, but danger is not far from our lives here,” he added gloomily.

In 2004, two years after the barrier’s construction began, the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled that it was illegal under international law, concluding that Israel must dismantle it and pay compensation for the losses and damages it caused.

Several artists, including the famous British graffiti artist Banksy, have painted on the wall. One of Banksy’s drawings is of a girl holding balloons and flying over the wall.

During the Kalandiya International Festival, 25-year-old artist Majd Abdul Hamid also used parts of the wall in his project. He grounded pieces from the wall and used them in an hour-glass. Abdul Hamid, who graduated from the International Academy of Art: Palestine; and the Swedish Art Academy of Malmo; told The Media Line that he worked on his idea with a creative art director from Jaba’ village near Jerusalem who lives near the wall.

“Sometimes the sand takes 20 minutes to pass, and sometimes 17 minutes,” he says. “It is not constant. Who knows how long the wait is going to be?”

“The wall looks nicer from the Israeli side, but nevertheless I don’t want to draw on the wall from the Palestinian side because I am against beautifying an ugly side of the occupation,” said Jarrar.

Jarrar was raised in the northern West Bank city of Jenin. He began his career as a carpenter in the northern Israeli city of Nazareth, a craft he learned from his father and later received his formal art training at Palestinian institutions.

“I want to show the world that Palestinians can use occupation as an economic means,” he says. “We can sustain ourselves from the wall.”

Jarrar decided to open his first gallery near an Israeli checkpoint outside of Nablus. In 2007, he affixed his photos to a portable wall that he placed near the Hawara checkpoint and called the mobile exhibition, “At the Checkpoint.”

Jarrar has gained recognition among foreigners, many of whom know him as “the stamp granter,” asking visitors at the Jerusalem-Ramallah bus station if he could stamp their passports with a stamp of his design as they entered “Palestine.”

His documentary, four years in the making, will debut in December at the Dubai International Film Festival. Entitled, “Infiltrators,” the film depicts a woman’s journey from the West Bank to Jerusalem for prayer and work.

“I am close to the wall and know the problems people face because of it, and want to convey this message to the world,” he says.

However, cutting out concrete from the wall is illegal, and the video shot by his friends can potentially expose Jarrar to legal jeopardy and even danger as international requests for “wall art” continue to mount.

Jarrar rejects Israel’s justification of the barrier on security grounds. “I don’t think the wall was built for security but for racist separation,” he says.

But a spokesman for Israel’s Defense Ministry told The Media Line that, “During the Second Palestinian uprising, between the years of 2000 and 2005, Israel lost over 1,000 citizens in terror attacks, suicide bombings, shootings, stabbings and other forms of indiscriminate terror.

Since the construction of the fence began, this number has dropped sharply. The fence is not impregnable. It is possible that some terrorists will manage to get past the barrier; nevertheless, the obstacle makes it far more difficult for incursions, and thereby minimizes the number of attacks.”

The spokesman emphasized the point with an illustration: “Before the construction of the fence, a suicide bomber could literally walk from Kalqilya [a Palestinian city] into Kfar Saba, or drive for 20 minutes and be in the heart of Tel Aviv. For half a decade, buses and cafes were exploding on a regular basis; today that is not the case.”

Jarrar says that as an artist his message is to show the injustice through his art.

“The wall is a source of separation that I wish will fall down eventually, but the wall unites people.”

“I want to show how the wall is separating families, affecting the lives of Palestinians and harming the environment,” he says, adding that he hopes people will sell pieces of the wall one day, “just like the Germans did in Berlin.”

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