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## A Defiant Act of Looking: Prisoners' Illicit Documentary Practices of Shooting-Back

### Abstract:

During an armed security operation on Lebanon's most notorious prison, an image emerges from the POV of a prisoner. Capturing the military vehicles and the prison bars obstructing his vision, a prisoner snatches a photograph through his illicitly smuggled cellphone camera.

In this article, I follow the events of Lebanese authorities' intervention on Roumieh Central Prison's Bloc B and collect a sample of images and videos produced and circulated by prisoners as the operation was taking place. By examining the frame, composition, POV, sound, and montage of such amateur fragmentary cellphone recordings, I note two major modes of framing adopted by prisoners; one frames outside the bars and the second frames inside. I contextualize such modes of framing as 'counter-shots' in relation to the state's media strategies of legitimizing its repressive actions and I argue that prisoners utilize smuggled media technologies, such as the cellphone and its camera, as a response to the state's performative acts of sovereignty. Prisoners operationalize the frame and the POV to create a 'counter' way of seeing and documenting the events on Bloc B. Hence, prison cellphone recordings reflect not only what is portrayed inside their frames, but also their means of production. Through the framework of media as practice and the notion of media witnessing, I argue that the illicitly produced modes of framing reflect a practice of media production based around the smuggling of media technologies into the prison. Through such a practice, prisoners produce images and videos to represent and document their lived expe-

riences, relay testimonies, and make the audience bear witness to the horrific and precarious conditions of incarceration; hence, engaging in a practice of documentation from the prison.

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**Key words:** Digital technology, prison, amateur recordings, media practice, media witnessing, cellphone camera, state warfare, new media, frame, POV

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On the morning of January 12, 2015 the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) stormed Roumieh Central Prison (RCP), the biggest and most notorious prison in Lebanon. The operation resembled an armed-forces invasion of a geographical territory in its intensity, planning, and weaponry. As described by the Lebanese Minister of Interior Affairs at the time the purpose of the operation was to reallocate prisoners and put an end to the illegal activities taking place in the infamous Bloc B, the part of RCP known to house individuals affiliated with fundamentalist Islamist groups. On the day of the ISF operation, a photograph taken through the bars of a prison-cell window began circulating on social media. The photograph, taken from the POV of an inmate in Bloc B, captured the ISF vehicles approaching the building and preparing for their operation. Shortly afterwards more images and videos began surfacing, notably a video recorded by an inmate showing the panic in the corridors of the prison. In this article, I address the role of the fragmentary amateur cellphone recordings produced and circulated by prisoners during the conflict with the ISF operation on RCP's Bloc B. The operation on Bloc B instigated an event where prisoners' illicit engagement with smuggled media technologies generated and exposed a new form of prison documentary; one that is controlled by prisoners and emerges from the prison. Therefore, I attempt, through the examination of such fragmentary amateur documentations behind bars, to understand and trace the practices of production emerging as prisoners in Lebanon smuggle and utilize media technologies during conflict with the authorities.

Since 2012, there have been various instances of smuggling of digital media technologies into Lebanese prisons. Prisoners illicitly get access to cellphones and an internet and telecommunication connection, and accordingly, produce and circulate images and videos which are then remediating on social and news media platforms. This is deemed illegal and Lebanese authorities are constantly attempting to stop and limit prisoners' access to cellphones (Najem, 2016, 2023). However, the event I discuss in this article presents a situation where the production and circulation of recordings was prompt and immediate; prisoners'

amateur recordings infiltrated news reporting on the prison in the media as the event was taking place and provided a 'counter-frame' to the way the state was representing this clash with Islamist prisoners. In this article, I collect and analyze images and videos produced and remediated during the ISF operation on Bloc B and I aim to examine the modes of framing reflected in such fragmentary amateur recordings, trace their means of production, and consider them as visual and sonic testimonies of a precarious life behind bars. In addition, I explore such prison cellphone recordings in relation to local and international news media's representation of events and the Minister of Interior Affairs' many media appearances. I argue that, during events of conflict with the authorities, smuggled media technologies, such as the cellphone and its camera, were utilized as a response and reaction to the state's performative acts of sovereignty and brought forward new ways of 'seeing' and techniques of representation as the result of prisoners' operationalization of the frame and POV. I revisit Lebow's (2012) articulation of the 'counter-shot' vis-à-vis the notion of the frame (Butler, 2005) and showcase that, during the events of 2015, two major modes of framing emerged from RCP aiming to document prisoners' conflict with the authorities: the first mode documented the ISF and their invasion, and the second mode documented the implications of the operation behind bars. Thus, one mode looks out and the other looks in.

I am inquisitive regarding the ability of such mediated modes of framing to bear witness and reveal not only the (anti-)aesthetics of the images produced, but stimulate imagination around their 'means of production' and reflect the constant struggle of prisoners to develop and engage with practices of media production. Therefore, I adopt the theoretical framework of media as practice, more specifically Mattoni's (2012) framework of activist media practices. I also attempt to reflect on the testimonial possibilities of such images and videos through the notion of media witnessing (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Torchin, 2012). Then, I argue that the production and circulation of prison cellphone recordings is not arbitrary, however, it is part of more established illicit prison media practices built on the operationalization of media technologies, establishing networks of communication, and the production and circulation of representations and documentations from behind bars. By utilizing the POV and the frame, prisoners attempt to create political affinity, call for mobilizations and support, and testify to their precarious conditions. Reflecting on the limitations of the 'counter-shot' metaphor, I discuss the exchange of frames and 'shots' as they have resulted in the emergence of a new political vision, a new 'way of seeing' as a result of prisoners' usage of cellphone cameras and the ability to mediate their photographs and footage. I conclude that prison cellphone recordings

functioned as ‘counter-shots’ in the context of this ISF operation, with benefits and limitations. The recordings brought an audience to the prison to experience the violent events from the position of the prisoner, and relayed testimonies of incarceration as well as fright and terror during the violent event. However, such recordings were easily appropriated in news discourse on RCP, and served as yet another component with the partisan narratives on RCP’s Bloc B.

### **Representation and Documentation from the prison**

Documentations of penology have traditionally constituted a form of visual realism that relates to governance, imperial administration and colonial violence, and surveillance technology, which have the tendency to present themselves as natural, unchanging, and ahistorical. As West (2017) argues, analog photographs helped propagate the assumption that the image ‘speaks for itself’ within the realm of criminology. This gave photographs evidential objectivity in the court of law over, for instance, oral testimony. Moreover, Tagg (2002) writes of the visual realism of criminal and phrenological photography as identified with penological and disciplinary regimes; similarly, Rabinbach (1992) discusses scientific kinesthetic photography as utilized through the Fordist labor discipline, and other scholarship addresses the role of photography in relation to visual realism in governmental surveillance of prisons and warfare (Appadurai, 1996; Feldman, 2000). This captures the essence of prison representations and documentations. Be it a documentary crew, a surveillance camera, a journalist, or a governmental administration, various aspects of penology have often been captured, documented, represented, and archived from the outside in. However, my premise in this article is to ask; what happens when such representations of penology begin to emerge and travel from the inside and out? What political visions might this evoke?

In ‘Shooting with Intent: Framing Conflict’ (2012), Lebow discusses the role and functions of counter-shot photography in relation to the long interconnection between war and cinema. The existence of a ‘shot’, and the placement of the camera from the POV of the gun, necessitates the existence of a shot from the other perspective – that of the barrel – which Lebow (2012) refers to as the ‘counter-shot’. Likewise, I raise in this article the possibility of the existence of a counter perspective to the realist representation and documentation of conflicts behind bars besides that of sovereign power, which has historically been responsible for producing, framing, and archiving modes of confinement. Prisoners’ communicative and documentary practices far precedes this article; prisoners have always tried to document and represent their lived experiences

whether through written testimonies, poems, novels, biographies, or through administered media practices such as podcasting, theater performances, or photography.<sup>1</sup> However, the case study I am engaging with contains an imminent illicit aspect; prisoners smuggled and claimed control over the camera and the cellphone which frees their processes of production and circulation from any forms of administrative control or censorship over the production of footage. In addition, there is a specificity to the technological materiality of the cellphone. In the case study discussed, prisoners get hold of a technological device that allows them to ‘shoot’ through a camera, as well as archive, document, communicate, and circulate immediately and promptly their photographs and footage through a hybridity of networks and applications. Unlike the traditional approach to the form of prison documentaries, the prisoner here is at the center of this practice of documentation; they illicitly gain control over the technological device, produce, and circulate their footage from one side of the bars to the other. Therefore, in this article, I am proposing an approach to the examination of a new form of prison documentation; a documentation from, as opposed to on, the prison.

### **Shooting-Back as a Documentary Practice of Bearing Witness**

The conceptual approach of this article is partly influenced by that of Didi-Hüberman who, in *Images in Spite of All* (2012), seeks to understand through the images themselves the means of production responsible for their creation, by reemphasizing and re-imagining the experiences of those behind the camera. The image provides a space for imagination while still positing a specific moment in space and time, Didi-Hüberman argues. The image remains indicative of an experience, an event, and a practice for those who deliberately take the active choice to smuggle in and utilize digital technology, consciously and strategically frame a photograph and footage, and circulate such recordings to various media ecologies outside the prison. Here, a media studies theoretical approach, that of media as practice, can be of help in conceptualizing prisoners’ mode of production and steering the analysis beyond just a symbolic examination of media representations. More specifically, I utilize the theorization of ‘activist media practices’ (Mattoni, 2012) as a backbone for the analysis. Activist media practices are defined as “routinized and creative social practices in which activists engage”. Activists’ engagement includes both the interactions with media objects and media subjects. The first entails their engagement through the cellphone as they generate and/or appropriate media messages, and the second entails their

<sup>1</sup> See O’Hearn (2017) for a discussion on prisoners’ communication practices; Hafez (2002) and Freeman (2009) for a discussion on prison novels and other writings in confinement; see Walsh (2019) on prisoner’ theater performances; Fleetwood (2020) on prison art and aesthetics.

interactions with media practitioners, such as journalists and social media activists (Mattoni and Treré, 2014, p. 259).

Moreover, as the extensive literature on media witnessing have argued, cellphone and digital technology open an opportunity for a witness to channel their testimony during the very act of witnessing, which can help in creating witnesses to distance suffering (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Chouliaraki, 2015; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Torchin, 2012). Therefore, I adopt the notion of media witnessing as the “witnessing performed in, by, and through the media” (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009) to draw on the testimonial potential of prison cellphone recordings. More specifically, I operationalize Andén-Papadopoulos’ (2014) definition of citizens’ phone camera recordings as a ritual of bearing witness aimed to create visual evidence to “produce and sustain feelings of political affinity and solidarity” (765). Digital media witnessing becomes “an act of representation that publicizes conflict death from the locals’ perspective so as to mobilize emotion and invite a response, be this revenge, outrage, contempt, fear or empathy” (Chouliaraki, 2015, p. 1362).

### **Methodological and Contextual Considerations: Tracing the Practice**

In order to create a sample of prison cellphone recordings and contextualize it in relation to the events of 2015, the process of data collection was as follows; I monitored the news reporting of the ISF operation on Bloc B of two international media institutions, France24 and AlJazeera, and three Lebanese local media institutions, AlJadeed, MTV, and Future TV on January 12, 13, and 14, 2015. Furthermore, I conducted a search on YouTube based on two main hashtags in Arabic; “Roumieh Prison Bloc B”, “Roumieh Prison Islamists”.

The collected pool of prison cellphone recordings is then analyzed in accordance with a set of analytical tools; composition, sound, montage, POV, (re) mediation. The purpose of these analytical tools is to move the analysis beyond just the symbolic analysis of representation and attempt to understand the practice of video and image production behind bars through the visual traces. Each analytical tool in this case can be delineated visually on the screen while still reflecting the practice responsible for it. Hence, this creates a connection between the images and videos, the material practices implemented by prisoners, the context of the ISF operation on Bloc B, and the appropriation of such amateur recordings by media institutions.

## Lebanese Penology

Prisons in Lebanon, especially RCP, suffer from failed infrastructure, miserable conditions, overcrowding, arbitrary arrests, and segregation of prisoners based on partisan and sectarian ideologies (El Hindi, 2013). Partisan sectarian identities have further influenced the fragmentations and affluence behind bars. Most notable to these formations are the Islamists. According to Lons (2016), following armed conflicts between the ISF and armed groups on the northern border with Syria, the ISF began to arbitrarily arrest individuals that it claimed were Islamists. The arrests were not made based on a clear legal framework, however, and what took place amounted to processes of vilification (ibid.). Islamists were then confined in one building bloc inside RCP; Bloc B. Therefore, Bloc B hosts a plethora of prisoners that are deemed to be ‘Islamists’, however, a few of them have gained prominent power inside the ecology of RCP due to partisan sectarian connections, imposed a hierarchy inside their building, and positioned themselves at the top of the food chain (El Hindi, 2013). Due to its history of violence with the authorities and the reported smuggling and access to digital technologies and internet access, Bloc B gained notorious reputations in media narratives and became the subject of various sensational news reporting (Najem, 2016).

I present the analysis in three major ‘acts’; the first concerns the legitimization of the ISF operation on Bloc B and the establishment of a state ‘way of seeing’ the event, the second concerns prisoners’ modes of framing and the production and circulation of prisoner produced amateur recording, and the third concerns the ‘counter-insurgent’ media appearances that followed the ISF event and aimed to reclaim control over the figurative ‘frame’.

### Legitimizing Warfare – Establishing Ways of Seeing

It is vital to understand this ISF operation in the prison as part of a bigger war on “terrorism”, as the Minister of Interior Affairs called it during a press conference; a process of re-establishing state sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> It is important to read the Minister’s ISF operation as a media event that aimed to create an image of sovereignty and strength with regard to his policies; it was not so much an operation to eliminate the dominion of those who had political affluence behind bars as a political message that the authorities are “capable, capable, capable” of bestowing sovereignty, to quote the Minister at the press conference.<sup>3</sup> This operation did not mark the end of the powerful position of Islamists in Lebanese

<sup>2</sup> See Video I in appendix

<sup>3</sup> See Videos II & III in appendix

prisons, in spite of what the authorities wanted the Lebanese people to believe (Rushchenko, 2018). Instead, through what Amel (1986) conceptualized as a hegemonic sectarian balance, prisoners with strong partisan connections remained at the top of the food chain in RCP.

To legitimize his ISF operation, the Minister of Interior Affairs highlighted many reasons for the invasion of the prison. Surrounded by a team of military, security, and policy personnel, the Minister of Interior Affairs conducts a press conference explaining the role and aim of the ISF operation. A television screen behind him shows the journalists in the room and people at home footage and images captured using CCTV cameras of riots and fights in the prison. According to the Minister, the reason for the armed invasion is to relocate prisoners from one bloc to another. The proof of the need for this is the CCTV footage being shown behind him, and the purpose is to end the reign of the Islamists and reinstate state sovereignty<sup>4</sup>.

The press conference resembles a trial where the defendant is absent; there is no difference between the trial and the judgement, the trial is the judgement and the criterion of judgement is the prisoners' compliance with the regime of abduction. Feldman (2015) writes with regard to prisoners' compliance: "the post-Fordist prison produces the 'entrepreneurial autonomy' of a prisoner as a "terrorist" through confinement that promotes the detainees' noncompliance with their detention as their compliance with the war on terror. In an ironic variation of the regimens of cognitive capitalism, the subject of penal production becomes the production of an incarceration-resistance subject" (36). The Minister performs his role as the enforcer of justice, arguing for the verdict to be implemented. The audience experiences this 'judgement' from the perspective of legitimized power; their only 'window' to envision and understand the prison is the images recorded by the CCTV camera. Through the press conference, the Minister presents images which are in turn mediated by the mainstream media, interpreting the reality of the prison from his own POV (See Figure I). The frame, as a form of visual interpretation of reality, is imposed on the audience here in accordance with the POV of state power; the Minister and his team of officials. As Butler argues (2005), camera angles, the frame, and subjects in the frame suggest that those who capture and construct a frame have an active role in the perspective of war. They have a conscious choice in drawing the borders of the frame and choosing what to put in and keep out of it, hence providing an (audio-visual) interpretation of the reality of war. Unlike previous events in RCP, local television channels' engagement with this conflict sided with sovereign power, mediating

<sup>4</sup> See Videos I, II, & III



a storyline by “interpreting in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception”, to borrow from Butler (Ibid., 823). By adopting this form of embedded reporting, Butler writes on embedded reporting that the mainstream media’s “gaze remained restricted to the established parameters of designated action” (Ibid., 822).



Figure 1. Surrounded by security officials and reporters, Al-Machnouk legitimizes the operation in Bloc B using CCTV footage.

## Prison Cellphone Recordings as Counter-Shots

The ISF operation was initiated at 6AM, at which time the Lebanese mainstream media was not covering or reporting on the event. The first image of the operation to circulate on digital platforms was produced by a prisoner and published by online news blogs and news sites, although its initial circulation from the prison may not have been intended for such.<sup>5</sup> Three military vehicles surrounded by soldiers are shown through the bars of what appears to be a window of a prison cell. The mere existence of a photograph taken from this perspective embodies a way of looking that has been considered to be illegal by the state, and is manifested in a practice of media production that the state has been aiming to dismantle.

After surveying the prison cellphone recordings collected on the ISF intervention in Bloc B, I noted the emergence of two major modes of framing, which I term below as Looking Out and Looking In. The difference between the two relates to where the camera is aimed. In the first mode of framing the camera is directed at the sovereign power/authority personnel invading the prison, and in the second the camera is directed at what the authorities are invading and the upheaval in the prison. The first thus primarily captures the authorities, be it personnel or vehicles, as they are about to begin their operation. These recordings are often calm and taken from the voyeuristic POV of the prisoner. The second may appear more familiar to the viewers, as they show the events of the ISF operation and the prisoners' panic, often including loud sounds and pleas for help. Both modes of framing were commonly used by news reports covering the ISF operation. Snippets of video recordings were reused, with sound and image often edited separately, and then inserted into the television news coverage. Since the ISF operation took only nine hours based on the Minister's press conference and the recordings that I collected were produced and circulated in that short period of time, I can state with certainty that the immediate circulation of the footage from the prison was accomplished using an internet connection. The urgency in shooting and circulating a recording affects the aesthetics of the recording itself, especially those created as the ISF operation was taking place. It is not clear whether such recordings were uploaded directly by prisoners onto social-media sites or circulated to an outside party responsible for the broader dissemination.

<sup>5</sup> See Example I in Appendix

## Looking Out-side the Prison Bars



*Figure II. Image from Bloc B moments before the military operation.*

The photograph shot from behind bars (Figure II) was widely shared on social-media sites and news platforms alike, and was one of the first photographs relating to the ISF operation to be circulated by prisoners. It features certain aesthetics in terms of composition that are similar to other photographs of this nature. A news report by MTV on the incident, for instance, appropriated images that have been taken from the same angle (see Figure III).<sup>6</sup> This news report was broadcast on the eve of the operation; the captions that accompany the photograph are “Roumieh Prison”, “the fall of the legend of the prison!”, and “communication found between prisoners and terrorist fragments in Tripoli”. The report provides a few details on the operation and re-states the allegation of a link between Islamist prisoners and bombings that took place in Tripoli.

In ‘Shooting with intent: Framing conflict’ (2012), Lebow draws on the relationship between the camera and the gun through the analogy of the shot/counter-shot; the shot is the POV of the gun, and the counter-shot that of the barrel. Lebow’s analysis raises two important factors in the analysis of the prison cellphone recordings in the context of conflict – the POV and the frame. Even though no gun barrels are visible in Figures II and III, the POV of the prisoner frames the military and security personnel and their weaponry, encapsulating the essence and symbolism of the figurative gun. From this perspective, I argue

<sup>6</sup> Also see Video IV in Appendix

that such imagery is a form of counter-shot. It presents the viewer with a new POV that the gun is pointed at. Interestingly enough, the frame captures the prison bars that situate the image at the end of yet another figurative barrel: imprisonment. The conscious choice to include the prison bars in the frame further situates the image in a context and delimits it as testimony. Furthermore, by claiming control over the POV, the prisoner behind the camera invites the audience to witness the war or invasion from the perspective of the defenders; the prisoners. The significance of POV here, as Lebow (2012) would argue, is that it brings the viewer “into the war as a virtual participant” (45). In contrast to the press conference discussed, which framed our reality of the incarceration through the frame of sovereign power (as seen in Figure I), imagery made from the POV of the prisoner shifts the focus, and the audience perceives reality from the frame of the prisoner for once (as seen in Figure II and III).

Images under the mode of framing of looking out were taken from behind bars, both literally and figuratively, and in each case, the subject who took the image was at a higher elevation than the military personnel. From a compositional standpoint, all of the people shown seem to be calm, giving the photographs a more reflective and voyeuristic feel. By utilizing this POV, the prisoner positions the audience against the ISF; the view of the outside world is hindered by the presence of the prison bars. In addition, the presence of the prison bars is a strong visual testimony to imprisonment; the image bears witness to the prison and the position of those holding the camera in it. When encountering the image divorced from its context, the viewer can still create a connection between the image and incarceration, as it makes use of the symbol of the bars. Such photographs manifest the essence of both the POV and the frame in reflecting the intentionality of framing adopted by the prisoner behind the camera. Moreover, the differences in angle between the photographs is crucial to understanding that the producers of these images were not randomly filming or photographing from the prison cell window, and instead all saw a very specific and clear target and chose to shoot that target from different angles to accentuate this opposition and document its presence and intensity. There is a clear intention on the part of the prisoners to document coercive power, and to relay this to outside parties as evidence.

The representations of state power, the prison architecture, and prison bars are central to the practice of image-making in this context. The representation of state power is at the heart of the photographs; it gives each meaning, and differentiates them from other possible recordings. By focusing the camera on the apparatus of state power, the producer draws a clear connection between this power and the

purpose of the photograph. Similar to the traditional ‘counter-shot’ composition, the photographer stands against state power, the two entities facing each other yet far from having a symmetrical relationship. To borrow the metaphor of Lebow (2012): the POV of the barrel is aimed at the prisoner, and that barrel is being looked back at from the POV of the prisoner through the camera lens. The former is about to attack, while the latter is defiantly looking back. The prison bars in the photographs symbolize confinement in a space and the limitation of mobility, foregrounding the vulnerable position of the prisoners and their inability to flee the violence that is about to be inflicted upon them through the representatives of state power, and with the help of the POV, the viewer is also positioned behind these very bars. The viewer’s experience of incarceration is generally derived from the traditional frame of the outside looking in, as discussed earlier in this article, and their frame is primarily constructed through the Minister’s press conference (as seen in Figure I). Upon encountering photographs such as that of Figure II, the viewer experiences the outside from inside, and thus a shift in the visual culture relating to incarceration. It is from this position that representations from the prison begin to impact the ‘way of seeing’ incarceration.



Figure III. Images captured by a prisoner ‘Looking Out’.

### Looking In-side the Prison Bars

The second mode of framing depicts the ISF operation from inside Bloc B. This type of recording predominantly consists of videos recorded from the POV of the prisoner, and can be differentiated from the other mode in two major ways: First, such videos were shot and produced at a much faster and chaotic pace, and include recorded speech or a voiceover. Second, they attempt to show the environment in which the prisoners were living, including prison cells and fellow prisoners, rather than aiming the camera at the apparatus of state power. Such recordings mainly capture the aftermath, the chaos, and the rioting of pris-



Figure IV. Video footage from Bloc B documenting the upheaval amid the military operation.

oners when the security personnel entered. The camera is constantly moving and shifting in an attempt to capture the events, rather than being fixed and targeting one specific frame.

After watching the collected recordings and examining both ‘raw’ and edited media, I found that most of the fragmentary footage used by news reports and circulated online had been adopted from one long video recorded by a prisoner during the operation. I did not manage to find the full video, but the longest single shot raw (unedited) version I found was 42 seconds (a frame of which is shown in Figure IV). This video was shot from the POV of a prisoner inside Bloc B, and shows the panic in the corridors of the building and the prisoners’ attempts to use their belongings to block the entrance. Fragments of this video were used in news reports by MTV, AlJadeed, and Al-Jazeera. The prison cellphone recording remediated by AlJadeed does not include voiceover narration, but captures some of the ambient sounds of prisoners and water flooding the space.<sup>7</sup> However, in other news reports voices and narration were often superimposed. For example, the MTV report appropriated certain fragments of the original recording from Bloc B; however, cross-analysis of the frames showed that the MTV report had a long narration added, and the ambient sounds from the prison had been altered.<sup>8</sup>

MTV showed 16 seconds of this footage alongside captions that read “Roumieh Prison”, “the fall of the legend of the prison!”, and “prisoners of Bloc “B” pleading for help”. The video also contains an imposed voice-over of a prisoner’s voice recording stating: “guys, the situation is really horrible here, some are injured, others are wounded, but thank god they haven’t gotten into the building yet, but the

<sup>7</sup> See Video V in appendix

<sup>8</sup> See Video IV in appendix

situation is horrible in the first, second, and third, tanks everywhere”. Directly after this statement there is a cut; instead of the narrator speaking, the video depicts a group of prisoners screaming “Allah Akbar”. The cut makes clear that it is the result of the montage done by MTV. In addition, it appears that the voiceover described above was added to the footage by MTV from a different source. There are common frames between the videos used in AlJadeed and MTV news reports; while the former does not feature any narration the latter does, and during this narration we do not hear the noise and sounds of the surroundings as much after the cut, when the prisoners are shouting. In this context, I claim that there is a conscious editing process, one that imposed voice-over narration and the shouting of “Allah Akbar”. The work of (re)montage significantly alters the testimonial message of the prison cellphone recording. Through editing and imposing sound and a voice-over the two news reports differ in meaning even though they use the same footage produced by the prisoner.



Figure V. The operation in Bloc B from the frame and POV of the Internal Security Forces.

Based on the composition of the footage, the prisoner cellphone recording used by AlJadeed, MTV, and Al-Jazeera was produced by the same prisoner.<sup>9</sup> It is apparent that the person recording is amongst, or one of, the other individuals in the mutiny and possesses a cellphone camera. His voice-over positions him within the frame. The prisoner moves the camera along his field of vision; the camera is

<sup>9</sup> See Videos IV, V, VI

an extension of the prisoner's vision, which records and, by extension, archives his experience of seeing. Instead of assuming a position and holding a steady and (semi) fixed frame, as in the first mode of framing, the camera moves vertically, horizontally, and diagonally. The fast, chaotic, and shaky composition of the video indicates that there is something precarious taking place, a dangerous event that disturbs the normal state of being. The prisoner filming does not aim the camera at his fellow prisoners; instead, the camera is positioned through back and side angles (as seen in Figure IV). The video shows the danger of the situation due to the ambient sounds, and reflects the actions of the prisoners in response to a military and security intervention. Accordingly, the viewer gets to experience the reactions of the prisoners amid the chaos.

The significance of the POV and frame resurface in this mode of framing as well. The frame shows the belongings of the prisoners scattered on the ground, an indication of violence and shock, underscoring the prisoners' panic. As spectators, we are not sure about the order of events, but understand through the panic that a form of riot is taking place and that there is a level of familiarity between the prisoners and their environment. The audience is, once more, engaged with the recorded events through the POV of the inmates.

An important factor in this mode of prison cellphone recording is sound: When prisoners decide to adopt a video format, they invite the viewer to experience not only the uncertainty of conflict, but also the horror and panic relating to the overwhelming sounds of explosions, screaming, and shouting. A new and different form of POV is at play here; a sonic one. An additional perspective on the video format and speech here is sonic framing in the form of the narration of the prisoner shooting the video. The voice-over narration of the prisoner in the video seems to be descriptive, as he provides context regarding what has happened and what the camera fails to visually convey.<sup>10</sup> It is unclear whom he is addressing; however, based on his tone and choice of words, the video seems to address someone the prisoners do not see as an adversary, and perhaps may view as an accomplice. "We have a lot of injured... thank god they haven't gotten in yet" the prisoner says – a statement that is not confrontational so much as a testimonial. The use of "they" implies that the target audience knows who "they" are. Footage such as this enhances the testimonial element in parallel to the aspect of mobilization that is discussed earlier. As it is not clear who the target audience is, this audience is not positioned as an adversary; instead, they are brought into this precarious environment and positioned side-by-side with the prisoner.

<sup>10</sup> See Video V in appendix



### After the Raid: Reclaiming the Frame and Erasing the Image



Figure VI. The minister, his team, and a TV camera crew go into RCP – Bloc B after the operation.

“We have successfully implemented the military operation”, the Minister of Interior Affairs declared after the ISF operation on Bloc B adding, “we man-

aged to move all the prisoners from one bloc to another and no harm has been inflicted on any of them”.<sup>11</sup> He emphasizes that the ISF operation was intended to dismantle the communications infrastructure and practices in RCP, which were allegedly linked to terrorist attacks. After the press conference the Minister conducted several media appearances, two of which I briefly discuss: the first was a discussion with a famous political television host, and the second a (re)visit to Bloc B. During the former, the Minister asks the producers to play an ‘unseen’ and exclusive piece of footage from the ISF operation, which recorded by a member of the security personnel with a cellphone camera at the gate of Bloc B. Attempting to hide behind his fellow officers on the front line of the confrontation with the Islamists, the security personnel member records from his POV the aggression inflicted by the prisoners as the police attempt to enter the third floor of Bloc B (see Figure V).<sup>12</sup> The Minister uses this footage to support his description of the professionalism of the ISF, and as proof of the ferocity and terrorism of the prisoners. By presenting such a video, the Minister acknowledges the importance and political uses of raw, amateur, cellphone-shot footage as unambiguous proof of ‘what really happened’. The aesthetic of the footage relays a certain, perceived truth. Unlike the footage shot by the prisoners, the audience here stands beside the authority personnel as they undergo attacks from the Islamists. The frame is snatched again and utilized by the ISF.

As discussed by Lebow (2012) in a broader sense, when watching such footage the viewer experiences the conflict, in this instance from the perspective of state power. The ‘being there’ component of the footage shifts from the position of the prisoner (shown in examples such as Figure IV) to that of the security personnel member (Figure V). Both pieces of footage – that produced by the prisoner and that produced by the member of the security personnel – are recorded evidence of the event taking place, they both even show the same bars at the gate of Bloc B. The audience become witness to the event depending on their position through the frame and POV; they can either be positioned alongside the prisoners or the ISF.

Authorities operationalize digital technologies during their counter-insurgent practices and are able to appropriate certain aesthetics to re-instate a specific ‘way of seeing’. With the broad utilization of amateur footage by both sovereign power and individuals aiming for a ‘counter-shot’, it becomes necessary to carry a critical consideration of the political position of those responsible for the frame. For

<sup>11</sup> See Video II in appendix

<sup>12</sup> See Video VIII in appendix

example, it is important to ask: Who is shooting? Whose political field of vision are they contributing to? And whom or which party does such shooting benefit? Such questions emphasize the practice by assessing its political nature and engaging a sense of criticality to the frame with regard to those behind the camera.

The second major media appearance of the Minister following the military operation was his visit to RCP's Bloc B. As part of an 'exclusive' report by Al-Jadeed, the Minister enters the prison; this time, the state (represented by the Minister) invades the prison armed not with weapons, but with cameras and a camera crew (see Figure VI).<sup>13</sup> He wanders around the destroyed building with his bodyguards, guiding the camera to the various "illegal" belongings the prisoners had, such as the remnants of the digital technology responsible for the prisoners' media practices. Alongside the media team, the Minister takes the viewer on an adventure of re-seeing the prison from the POV of sovereign power.<sup>14</sup> The audience's gaze, initially shifted through the use of the camera by the prisoner, is shifted once again. This renders the prison subject to yet another raid – one conducted using the camera, which here is not a mere reference to a gun, but a direct extension of its power (Lebow, 2012). The viewer, this time, witnesses the aftermath of the military operation through the new lens of mainstream media led by the Minister himself; the new frame of the sovereign prevails. Attempting to keep pace with the Minister and his team, the reporter tries to cover the destruction in the building while simultaneously asking the Minister questions. The Minister reassures the reporter that the operation is over, everything is back to normal, they have defeated the enemy, and there is nothing left to see. Through visual practices the state reestablished police order, took control of the camera, and reclaimed the viewer, who is now on their side.

### **Shooting Back: A Defiant Act of Looking**

As Butler (2005) argues in relation to embedded reporting, journalists' compliance with the regime of war inhibits a specific critical vision of sovereign power. This was exemplified in relation to the Iraq and Falklands Wars by Butler (2005) and Sontag (2003), respectively. Here, journalists avoided showing pictures of the dead and soldiers' coffins, and complied with the British government's discourse on war in order to be permitted access to the action in the case of the latter conflict. Through such processes the media actively controlled the "cognitive apprehension of war" (Butler, 2005, p. 823). I notice a similar trend of embedded reporting with regard to the military operation in Bloc B. I note here the absence of reporting on

<sup>13</sup> See Video VII in appendix

<sup>14</sup> See video VII in appendix

and coverage of the military invasion, and blatantly ‘one-sided’ coverage of mainstream media institutions. The prison cellphone recordings compensated for this by providing an alternative to the mainstream media. This, yet again, speaks to the ‘counter-shot’ component of such recordings. The countering element takes place here as the camera of the prisoner shoots the aftermath and destruction resulting from the ‘gun’ of sovereign power, yet does so by providing a window into the conflict that provides a counter perspective to the one provided by the mainstream media. Thus, prisoners’ practice of footage and image production oppose not only the angle but also the lack thereof in the mainstream media’s coverage.

I conceptualize both of the modes of framing that emerged from this conflict as forms of ‘counter-shot’ in order to further highlight the role of the camera, POV, sound, and frame in creating an opposing vision on warfare, and hence draw on the potential of prisoners’ practices of ‘counter-shot’ production. In contrast to the audience’s experience of the press conference, which reflects the reality of incarceration from the perspective of state power, the audience experiences this conflict from the position of a prisoner. The viewer, side by side with the prisoner, is subjected to state power. The POV, as Lebow (2012) would argue, brings the viewer “into the war as a virtual participant” (45). This aims to create witnesses among the audience, and documents a form of mobilization taking place; the footage mainly captures prisoners rioting against the authorities. The simple presence of the camera behind bars in this context creates an opportunity for defiance in the visual realm; it instigates a practice of ‘visual’ documentation that is inherently prohibited. Both Feldman (1991) and Lebow (2012) speak of the use of the camera in the context of “shooting back” as a provocation; here, the camera is a direct counterpart to the gun and a challenge to authority in that it allows the prisoners to reclaim their right to frame.

By conceptualizing such recordings as functioning as ‘counter-shots’, I do not intend to argue for their significance solely as opposing visions on warfare; they also have their limitations. This is connected to both the producers of such ‘visions’, and to the limits of the barrel POV type of photography. The style of photography that emerges from the POV of the barrel is limited in its ability to address injustices and lead to tangible change with regard to the repressive conditions that are responsible for the creation of such images in the first place. As Lebow argues, what such footage achieves is to “alter the superficial conditions” of the “subjective violence”, and in such a case the changes are minimal or temporary. In the context of this case study, these limitations are further enhanced by the problematic partisan politics of the prisoners shooting the videos in the first place, and the narratives constructed around these in the media which prohibit, or reduce, forms of affect or responsibility on the part of the audience. Al-

though they may seem to use a similar style of ‘shooting’, it would be unfounded to equate the efforts of a problematic group such as the Islamists with, for example, a humanitarian organization recording the atrocities of the occupation, as per the example used by Lebow (2012). However, how are such prison amateur documentations useful then? And what can we learn from such emerging modes of framings instead of, say, dismissing the analysis of the counter-shot?

First, even though they might appear as chaotic forms of footage and image production, prison cellphone recordings are indicative of established production practices based on the illicit smuggling of a cellphone into the prison, the operationalization of the camera and the internet connection, and the establishment of networks of communications with affiliates outside the prison. While what is being documented inside the frame is key to understanding the function and intention of these amateur images and footage, what is left out of that very frame is also indicative of emerging documentary techniques and practices from the prison. Under surprise attack and amidst a violent interaction and heavy rioting against the ISF, prisoners still managed to produce and circulate their recordings from the prison. This is evidence that prisoners had already smuggled and acquired digital technologies, figured how to charge and top up their devices with credit, maintained internet and telecommunication connection, and sustained an exchange of information with their affiliates on the outside. The production of footage, especially during the mode of framing of looking in, was immediate and contextualized both the events and carried testimonies. If the allegations of AlJadeed are true and the footage shot in the dark corridors of Bloc B was in fact streamed live through a Facebook page, then prisoners’ emerging techniques of documentation and modes of framing have intricately developed to the extent that news media had to resort to them for journalistic reporting.

Second, since confinement institutions are built on the control and separation of information, any emergence of sensory information from behind the walls carry with it testimonial possibilities of those responsible for its production and dissemination. Both modes of framing discussed earlier evoke a field of vision which embodies testimony as to the conditions responsible for their creation. The compositions of the images and videos, POV, positioning of the camera, use of voice-over, all relayed the fact that the practice of media production was driven by a sense of bearing witness. Such ‘counter-shots’ are eminent, first and foremost, in testifying to the fact that a practice of media production exists behind bars; images and videos are visible proof of the existence of a technological device capable of capturing, documenting, archiving, and circulating them from the heart of the conflict onto our screens. Also, such fragmentary amateur documentations relay the intentions of those who produced them, an intention

to document and testify to the lived experience amidst the events. In addition, as Butler would argue (2005), an interpretive power is imposed onto the photograph by the practice itself or the intention of the subject composing the image through the frame. The military vehicles, prison architecture, and prison bars are central to the composition of the photographs as testimony. Similarly, the choice of words and the hectic movement of the camera are driven by the need to testify to the overwhelming sentiments of horror facing state violence. This relays the prisoners' intention to record, produce, and instantly share "persuasive personalized eyewitness records with mobile and globalized target populations", as Andén-Papadopoulos would term it (2014, p. 760).

Consequently, there is an inherent dissident dimension to the emergence of the modes of framing discussed earlier; prison cellphone recordings begin to embody the illicit nature that is necessary for their production and circulation from behind bars. However, through visual dominance, the Lebanese authorities have attempted to erase prisoners' representations. According to Feldman (2015), the sovereign state conducts its war against the witnessing of that war, and invests its energies in sensory inscriptions and erasures of war. The mere presence of a camera and the existence of a practice of media production was one of the main reasons for the Minister to initiate a war. The raid on Bloc B was not only against the Islamists but against the idea that a POV and a frame, and – most importantly – an act of looking other than that of sovereign power could exist.

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## Appendix:

### Video I

AlJadeed News (2015, April 30) عاضوا لوح قونشمل داهن ري زولل يف احص رم توم نوجسلا. [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/MjdS0VnnRfw>. (Accessed January 19, 2023).

### Video II

AlJadeed News (2015, January 19, 2023) نوجس يف عديج دل حرم عدب نل عي قونشمل داهن. [Video]. YouTube. [https://youtu.be/dK-4teES\\_dE](https://youtu.be/dK-4teES_dE). (Accessed January 19, 2023).

### Video III

Nohad Machnouk | نوجس يف يباهر ال ابي جال طوقس (2015, January 13) قونشمل داهن. [video] YouTube. <https://youtu.be/C2tOJ9jUxA0>. (Accessed January 19, 2023).

### Video IV

MTV Lebanon News (2015, January 12) Prime Time News - 12/01/2015 - طوقس انجسلا. [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/OBz-rqQDIg>.

### Video V

AlJadeed News (2015, January 12) "ةيمور نوجس تاهاج اوم" ويديف ثبت ةرصنل. [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/0zVxfib9HIQ>.

### Video VI

AlJazeera Arabic قرش ةيمور نوجس لخاد ةي نم ةيلم ع (2015, January 12) قري زجال ةانق. [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Mf7wIqalu1M>

### Video VII

AlJadeed News (2015, January 13). ةيمور نوجس لخاد نم «ديجلال» ةانقل ةصاخ دهاشم. [Video]. Youtube. <https://youtu.be/ybxU30LLnVQ>. Accessed January 19, 2023.

### Video VIII

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