

Betraying Palestine: Mr. Bush's trip to Ramallah

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PA police confront demonstrators protesting Bush's visit in Ramallah.

So US President George W. Bush came to Ramallah, and of course the city was turned upside down. The Palestinian Authority (PA) wanted to show that they were up to the task of handling the security.

I managed to get a press pass and I was cynical but curious to see how the big show would go down. All the photographers and journalists were told to come at 6am at a certain location so that they could be taken all together to the Muqata'a, the PA's headquarters.

I did not want to play this game. I wanted to document the "behind the scenes" of the visit and to feel the atmosphere of the streets. I wanted to show the absurdity of it all, the big circus that the PA agreed to host. I was also told that there would be some demonstrations and I did not want to miss them.

Early that morning I was woken up by the din of the helicopters and the sirens. Was Ramallah attacked? Then I remembered that we were under siege because the visit of George W. Bush. As I moved around the city, I discovered that the streets were empty and the impression of a ghost town was reinforced by the presence of a heavy fog.

From al-Manara, the center of the city, two streets were closed. Some Palestinian policemen were standing with their brand new uniforms, preventing people from going further. I argued with them that I had a press card and that I was on the list of the American Consulate, and so I should be allowed to go inside the Muqata'a. However, they told me that it was not possible and that the whole area was now closed. I tried to go through the back streets, and soon faced some soldiers with very impressive army gear. For one moment I asked myself if I was confronted by Palestinian, American or Israeli soldiers. But they were Palestinians. Again they told me to go. I tried another road, in vain. I asked the Palestinian soldiers at what time they came and they answered me at 3:00am. Then I decided to go to a Palestinian friend's house to watch Al-Jazeera live. I asked my friend what she would tell Bush if she could talk to him and she answered: "Why do you come here, killer?"

Then we watched Bush at the press conference. My friend was not listening too much. As a sign said at the demonstration in Jerusalem the night before, "No more Bushit." There was an ironic juxtaposition on the television as the headlines scrolled at the bottom of the screen. Bush was saying "Peace is possible" while at the same time the headline read, "Two civilians killed in Gaza by Israeli air strike." Then he made an arrogant joke about passing through the checkpoint, and how he did not have to wait. I remembered the previous day

when I went to Jerusalem and how we were stuck inside and had to wait in the freezing cold before the soldiers finally decided to let us go. I also remembered the line of workers at Bethlehem checkpoint who queue up as early as 4am. How dare he joke about this? Let him put on a *kuffiyeh* (traditional Palestinian scarf) and try to travel from Ramallah to Bethlehem like a Palestinian. He would not bear one trip.

Then I had enough of the press conference and I moved to al-Manara as there was supposed to be a demonstration there and indeed people were peacefully carrying banners with slogans such as "Our freedom is not for sale," "Remove all settlements," "It is the occupation stupid," and "Gaza on our mind." Soon the Palestinian police came and began to shout at people not to stand on the road. Then they began to push and attempted to prevent photographers from doing their work. A Palestinian photographer was arrested. I could not believe it. I was also shout at but I continued to move around to take pictures.

Soon we heard about a demonstration next to the Orthodox Club so we went there, only to find more police and even special Palestinian security forces.



PA policemen armed with clubs.



A PA policeman detaining a demonstrator.

The police were blocking the street to prevent people to join the demonstrators. I argued that I was doing my job and that they had to let me pass but they would not. So with a few friends we had to climb some fences and run towards the demonstration, only to find again more Palestinian forces ready to crush the demonstration.

The demonstrators included Palestinians from different factions and movements, and many women in the front row. Suddenly the Palestinian forces attacked the demonstrators with gas and sticks; the beaten up demonstrators included the numerous women present. Photographers and journalists were also attacked. I found myself taking the same type of pictures that I take at demonstrations against the Wall, only this time it was Palestinians oppressing Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority used the same tactics as the Israeli soldiers. The pushing, crushing, the gas. They even had some special forces in civilian dress to identify the most active demonstrators.

All expression of dissent had to be crushed so that the circus could go ahead.

As with Israeli soldiers, it was quite clear that some Palestinian officers were not at ease with beating up demonstrators. Some other were on the contrary very aggressive. Suddenly one policeman attacked one young Palestinian with a stick and broke his nose. Some policemen also angrily confiscated some signs against the occupation and tore them into pieces. The crowd continued to shout "Bush and CIA out!" The Palestinian filmmaker Mohammed Alatar was also arrested and a camera was confiscated from a Palestinian photographer.

All along I was thinking, "What a sad day for Palestine." After almost two hours of confrontation, the demonstration finished. We all went away a little shocked. But I think we

should face this and not pretend that it did not happen. The PA is acting more and more as a proxy to benefit the Israelis, with methods comparable to the occupier. They learned well but we have also to learn from this episode. We internationals working in Palestine, what are we fighting for? Which Palestine? If we are talking about a pseudo Palestinian state run by the methods used by the PA today, and for the service of Israeli and US interests and the Palestinian elite, then this is not a worthy fight. The Palestinian Authority must go. A revolution has to start in support of Palestinians that rejects the master plan designed by Bush and Olmert and implemented by the PA. There are some alternatives, and strong voices on both sides which are more and more frequently advocating the vision for a one-state solution. We internationals involved in the struggle should clearly position ourselves.

I would like to thank Mr. Bush for opening my eyes on the true face of the PA. Now it is clear that the struggle has different fronts. If we ignore one of them we will lose it all.

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