

Mayor: The dilemmas, contradictions and sheer impossibility of “running a city” under Israeli occupation

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Directed and with music composed by David Osit.

Mayor is the latest work by American film director and composer David Osit, best known for *Thank You for P laying* and *Games You Can't Win* (a short film). He spent a year filming Musa Hadid in his day-to-day work as the Christian mayor of Ramallah, the de facto capital of the West Bank, occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

The city, designated as Area A under the 1993 Oslo Accords, is nominally under the full control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Even before the pandemic, more than a quarter of Palestinians were living below the poverty line. With the economy shrinking by at least seven percent in 2020, poverty has increased to around 30 percent. Those that are working often go without pay for weeks if not months, as Israel withholds the PA's money.

Mayor was one of the winners at the March 2020 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival (in Durham, North Carolina), one of the last in-person festivals to take place before the pandemic closed down such events, where it won a standing ovation from the 1,700 strong audience.

Shunning voice-overs, archival footage, commentary, and an explicit focus on the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *Mayor* is an engrossing and understated film with moments of black comedy. It shows the everyday life of the mayor and the practical problems, not to say absurdities, of “running a city” under occupation that demonstrate the utter fraud of “self-rule.”

Hadid, a civil engineer and mayor since 2012 after winning two subsequent municipal elections, has no substantive power within the context of the Israeli occupation. Drivers honk their horns and wave to the popular, besuited and urbane figure in Ramallah as he walks around the city. He remains calm whatever the

circumstances and tries to avoid the broader political conflict.

The film spends much of its time showing the mayor discussing with his colleagues Ramallah's attempts to rebrand itself as a tourist destination. “WeRamallah” is the slogan advertising the city. The rebranding effort is bolstered by the city's neon Christmas tree. Hadid and the others organise how a team of Santa Clauses will descend down buildings during the tree-lighting ceremony and plan a fountain in the town centre.

We see the mayor carrying out various mundane activities, such as visiting schools where he promises to fix wonky plumbing and doors that do not close properly, checking on park benches.

However, the constraints of living under occupation predominate over all aspects of life—and death. Hadid was called out when there was a sewage blockage. To resolve it, the Palestinians need access to a nearby treatment plant that is controlled by the Israelis who refuse access. The city does not even have its own sewage treatment plant. Israel will not allow it. “I literally can't deal with this s---,” Hadid says. He explains that it took 15 years to get a permit to expand the cemetery so they could bury their dead.

In another scene, local people standing on a rooftop point out the ever-shrinking distance between their home and the ever-expanding Israeli settlements. They can see Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and even the sea on a clear day, but they are not allowed to visit any of those destinations. Speaking about the Israeli occupation and settlements, Hadid says, “Even when they're not doing anything, it's suffocating.”

Like any city mayor, Hadid faces crises, but of a different character. Israeli settlers deliberately poison groundwater or attack farms. Since the beginning of this

year, settlers have committed at least 52 violent acts against Palestinians, including throwing stones at vehicles and homes, and attacking farmers, wounding 14 Palestinians, including two children.

The mayor and his team host a group of well-meaning German delegates trying to arrange a dialogue between the Palestinians and Israelis. They try to persuade Hadid to make some concessions to the Israelis, to make some gestures, implying that the Palestinians are being intransigent and obstinate. He refuses, describing how 16-year-old Israeli soldiers make Palestinians strip naked, “It’s about dignity. And when it comes to dignity, I think it’s something non-negotiable.”

When President Donald Trump announces his decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, destroying any possibility of a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem, one of Hadid’s colleagues says, “How are you so calm, Musa?” He replies in a voice of resignation, “It’s happening whether we’re freaking out or not.”

As he goes to investigate problems, Israeli soldiers fire shots close to his car. Later there is a far more serious encounter with Israel’s military when soldiers invade Ramallah to disperse a demonstration protesting the American embassy’s move. Hadid is trapped in the City Hall, unable to leave as soldiers overrun the city centre, going door to door and raiding businesses to seize surveillance footage, supposedly in search of protesters who shot at a soldier, in a show of force aimed at intimidation.

When calm returns after the protestors chase the soldiers away by throwing rocks, he finds that newly opened musical fountain, his pride and joy, has been damaged. He sighs, “God help us,” as he collapses into an office chair, “Every year, same chaos, same story.”

The film is aimed primarily at an American audience. In one scene, where he is looking out at the city from his office, Hadid turns to the camera and asks if Americans care about what is happening there. He says, “I feel jealous when I visit other cities. There’s so much they can do that we can’t.”

Osit admits, “I don’t have a solution to the crisis in the Middle East. I don’t believe that enfranchising one group of people at another’s expense is a good idea, but this film is not about that. A film can’t give you everything, and if it tries then you lose the power of storytelling. This is a fable about a man trying to do good in a place you think you know.” Then he adds, “But is this the vanity of a lost cause?”

The mayor, a decent family man, is placed in an

impossible situation. Facing insurmountable obstacles, he focuses on minor issues because he is trapped within the framework established under the Oslo Accords, accepting or rather resigning himself to the capitalist world order, poverty and social inequality to which he—and Osit—see no alternative.

The Accords relegate the Palestinian Authority and its municipalities to the status of subcontractors to the Israeli state, policing the Palestinian working class on behalf of the Israeli financial elite and dependent on the (non-existent) goodwill of the Arab regimes and the imperialist powers, above all the US. Two years ago, Washington ended its financial support for the Palestinian Authority, except for its security forces, as well as its funding of UNWRA, the UN’s relief organization that provides basic services and humanitarian aid for the Palestinians who fled or were forced to leave their homes in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948-49 and 1967, and their descendants. The Arab regimes have made their peace with Israel, underscoring the dead end of the Palestinian nationalist perspective.

The Palestinians and working people across the region have time and time again shown their willingness to combat their brutal exploitation, but they have lacked a revolutionary perspective for ending imperialist domination and its inevitable consequences—poverty and repression.

The solution to national oppression and social exploitation lies not along a national and capitalist road, but an international and socialist one. The existing division of the region, and the entire world, into antagonistic nation states must be dismantled and replaced with a United Socialist States of the Middle East. This requires a unified struggle of the working class throughout the region, uniting behind it the rural poor, in struggle against both imperialism and the national bourgeois classes to reorganize society on a socialist basis.



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