

Mayor Discussion Guide

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FILM SUMMARY

Musa Hadid is the Christian mayor of Ramallah, the de facto capital of the Palestinian Authority. As he tries to keep his city running while paving sidewalks, planning holidays and building a new fountain, his job is made increasingly difficult by the Israeli occupation of his home. *Mayor* asks with humor and quiet outrage: *how do you run a city if you don't have a country?*

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed for people who want to use *Mayor* to engage and inspire family friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities in honest, though challenging, conversations. It is an invitation for dialogue that requires preparation before you and your community dive in as well as a commitment for all participants to be fully present. Conversations that invoke experiences of political violence and exclusion; and/or feelings of belonging, safety, and identity can be difficult to begin and facilitate. This resource offers support and structure to guide the process. In contrast to debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this guide envisions dialogue undertaken in a spirit of openness and active listening where divergent viewpoints are heard and responded to with care and respect.

Individuals and communities may also come to the conversation using *Mayor* with varying degrees of knowledge, as well as dynamic and different experiences. The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the topics in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose the questions that best meet your needs and interests. *And be sure to leave time to consider taking action.* Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult and/or uncomfortable. Whenever possible, please consider a closing activity that gives participants an opportunity to offer gratitude to one another before closing.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER[

I've spent a fair amount of time in the Middle East over the past decade, but I've always been struck by Ramallah in particular as a city in conflict both inside and out - divided between capitalist future-building and preservation of a rapidly-vanishing past; a city of artsy hipster bars and high-security Israeli checkpoints. You won't find terrorists or camels in Ramallah, only the occasional snowstorm and free unlimited public WiFi. In other words, it thoroughly pierces the Western narrative as to what "The Middle East" is "supposed" to look like.

When I met Musa Hadid - the Christian, liberal, charismatic mayor of Ramallah with a vape pen always by his side and a radical plan to turn Ramallah's public space into a Middle Eastern version of Amsterdam - I knew there was a unique way to understand the discourse around Palestine by following him in his daily work; work that is repeatedly and regularly interrupted by a colonial military apparatus that has control over his city's land and well-being.

Ken Loach once said that "a film isn't a political movement - at best, it can add its voice to public outrage." However, in the case of Palestine, the politics around its representation are entirely created by popular culture: cinema, television, news functioning as entertainment, all contribute to a Western narrative that defines Palestine through its victimhood - at best. Palestinian identity, for those abroad, becomes its lack of identity.

I wanted to make a film that shifts the narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict away from intractable debate, and instead tell a story of a small town mayor dealing with small town problems amid a military occupation of his city. We are living in an era when discussing the rights and humanity of Palestinians has been written into legislation in several countries as an act of hate against another nation of people. Very quietly and obliquely, MAYOR challenges the logic of this assertion.

MAYOR also follows the dramatically underreported consequences of American foreign policy on a nation persistently denied autonomy and representation on the international stage. I set out to make a film about local government in the shadow of an occupation, and quickly found

myself filming during one of the most traumatic times in Ramallah's history - where even the small public space that Musa labors over becomes a symbol of resistance and identity by the end of the film. My goal was to break down the audience's understanding of what a Middle Eastern city "should" look like within the first five minutes - Christmas celebrations, classical music, even an old Hollywood feel - and build a new framework of understanding for how that audience can relate to this part of the world.

David Osit, *Filmmaker*

THE FILM:

Key Participants

Musa Hadid: Mayor of Ramallah

Mahmoud Abbas: President of the State of Palestine

Mohammed Shtayeh: Prime Minister of Palestine

Key Issues

The Israeli occupation of Palestine is the backdrop and context in *Mayor*, but not its main focus. *Mayor* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore more about the following topics:

Day-to-day life of a mayor

Local and municipal leadership

Palestinian life and culture

Life in Ramallah under occupation

The relationships between land, memory, and identity

Imperialism and political violence

Creating civic space and community

Limits of power under military occupation

Living with generational trauma

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Note: This background focuses on information specifically related to the film Mayor and the city of Ramallah. For a fuller picture of the region's history see the recommended resources at the end of this guide.

Brief Timeline Relevant to Mayor

- Under the Ottoman government, Ramallah acknowledged as a city in 1908.
- From 1918 - 1948 Ramallah falls under the British Mandate.¹
- In 1948 UN Resolution 181² is passed by the United Nations General Assembly. Thousands of Palestinians are displaced and forcibly removed from their homes as a result. The city of Ramallah more than doubles in size.³
- June 5-June 10, 1967. War between Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. As a result , Ramallah and the rest of Palestinian cities under Jordanian rule in the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, fall under Israeli occupation.⁴
- 1967 Israeli civilians, settlers, move into Israeli occupied Palestinian territories and build physical and non-physical structures and processes that constitute, enable and support the establishment, expansion and maintenance of Israeli residential communities, or settlements. While this accelerated after the 1967 war, settlements date back to the Green Line of 1949 in the occupied Palestinian Territory.⁵
- 1972 first municipal elections in Ramallah following Israeli occupation.
- 1977 The building of Jewish settlements around Ramallah, and other parts of the West Bank, accelerates after the election of Menachem Begin.⁶

¹ <https://www.un.org/unispal/history/>

² <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/7F0AF2BD897689B785256C330061D253>

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/148000/mde150591999en.pdf>

⁴ [https://undocs.org/S/RES/242\(1967\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/242(1967))

⁵ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session22/A-HRC-22-63_en.pdf, <https://www.btselem.org/settlements>, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52756427>,

⁶ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/facts-about-jewish-settlements-in-the-west-bank>

- 1987 The first Intifada begins. Intifada is Arabic for “shaking off” as in shaking off military occupation.
- 1994 Oslo Accords lead to the establishment of The Palestinian Authority located in Ramallah.⁷
- Ramallah becomes the home to the tomb of Yassir Arafat, PLO leader of Palestinian struggle for independence from 1969-2004.
- 2002 Israeli military invaded Ramallah and many other Palestinian cities destroying large sectors of their infrastructure.⁸
- 2012 Engineer Musa Hadid is elected mayor, and is re-elected in 2017.
- 2017 President Trump declares Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, moves the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

“President Trump’s declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and his instructions to eventually move the US embassy there is a flagrant violation of international law and treaties. There can be no Palestinian State without the city of Jerusalem as its capital. We will not accept it.”

-Mahmoud Abbas, President of Palestine, *Mayor*

Palestinian Life in Ramallah

Before the 1948 formation of Israel, the land between Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon was called Palestine. The Arabic-speaking people who lived there were largely Sunni Muslims with a significant Christian minority, and they identify strongly with the land and its rich culture and traditions. Historically, the economy was agrarian, with a strong cultural focus on family solidarity, and adherence to Islamic traditions of hospitality, honor, and respect for elders. Palestinians have a strong cultural tradition of dance, art, poetry, and literature. Traditional dress is exemplified by ‘tatriz,’ or intricately embroidered robes with colors that represent geography and clan affiliation.

⁷ <https://israelipalestinian.procon.org/background-resources/1995-oslo-interim-agreement/>

⁸ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-210376/>

Residents of Ramallah include those whose families have generations of history there, as well as those who were displaced by war and conflict, and those who have moved there more recently to participate in the Palestinian Authority or other domestic and international civic society organizations, including the United Nations and other foundations and aid organizations, and the nearby Birzeit University. Ramallah boasts a diverse and vibrant arts community, including dance and theater troupes, restaurants and cafes, and multiple nightlife establishments.

All day-to-day functions of life in Ramallah are affected by the Israeli occupation. Though its designation as “Area A” means that Ramallah has its own police force, the Israeli military can enter the city whenever there is a perceived security threat. The city is surrounded by contested Jewish settlements which benefit from much more advanced and reliable infrastructure (such as water, sewage, and electrical systems) than are available to Palestinians, and there are frequent instances of conflict and even violence between individuals and groups of Palestinians and Jewish settlers. Palestinians are also restricted from accessing land and using particular roads open to Jewish-Israeli settlers. Residents of Ramallah are not allowed to enter Israel without Israeli documentation, preventing them from visiting family members, holy sites in Jerusalem, or to complete travel out of the International Airport in Tel Aviv. Though the Palestinian Authority can issue identification and travel documents, as they are not an internationally recognized sovereign state, many Palestinians who live there are not considered citizens of any nation.

The Importance of Ramallah in the Region

The city of Ramallah is located 10 kilometers north of Jerusalem, and has a population of about 42,000 people.⁹ The city has a rich history, formally established in the 16th Century by a group of Christians, Ramallah has persisted through multiple transitions under the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, and the Jordanian and Israeli governments. Historically, the city has been a diverse, urbane and liberal Palestinian

⁹ http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/RamallahE.html

cultural center, whose location and elevation, along with its famed olive and grape harvests, has long attracted tourists from around the region.

Ramallah has also been host to all kinds of activism to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation, in particular during the first Intifada in the 1980s. Currently, Ramallah is the seat of the Palestinian Authority (PA).¹⁰

The PA was established after the 1993 signing of the [Declaration of Principles on Self-Government Arrangements](#) (aka the Oslo Accords). The centerpiece of the Oslo Accords was the mutual recognition of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The Accords resulted in partial withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied areas of the West Bank (land west of the Jordan river) and the Gaza Strip, the release of many Palestinian political prisoners, and Palestinian self-determination through the PA in specific areas, including Ramallah, designated ‘Area A.’

The formation of the PA in Ramallah in 1995 sparked rapid population growth and the city has emerged as the cultural and economic center of the West Bank and host to many domestic and international civil society organizations including the nearby Birzeit University. Ramallah acts as the administrative capital of the West Bank, though many Palestinians dream of a future state with Jerusalem as its capital.

The 1993 Oslo Accords deferred the most complicated conflicts between Israeli and Palestinian people in the hopes of future negotiations that would establish two separate states. Despite multiple efforts in the 2000s and beyond, a two-state agreement has yet to be realized. Several of the issues that remain unsolved emerge in *Mayor*, including ongoing violence, the right of return for Palestinian refugees displaced by war and conflict, the continued illegal establishment of Jewish settlements on Palestinian lands, and the status of the city of Jerusalem, which both Israelis and Palestinian claim as their

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ramallah>

capital. As a result, the Palestinian Authority's power for self-determinance and governance remains limited by the Israeli occupation.¹¹

Local Leadership of Mayor Musar Hadid¹²

“Local governance is the most beautiful field of work in our country.”

-Mayor Musa Hadid, *Mayor*

Musar Hadid was elected as the Mayor of Ramallah in 2012, after a life-long commitment to public service. Mayor Hadid was deeply involved in political life beginning with his education at Birzeit University, from which he received a Bachelor's degree in engineering. He was an active participant in the first Intifada in 1987, and has since held prominence in Palestinian organizations working to achieve independence and liberation from occupation.

Professionally, his career as an engineer offers him unique insight into the infrastructural needs of a city like Ramallah, including water, sewage, and electricity systems. In addition to his Mayorship, Hadid is involved in many other municipal and national organizing projects, such as the Palestinian Union of Local Authorities, the Higher Presidential Committee of Church Affairs in Palestine, the Jerusalem Water Undertaking, and many more.

His vision for the city of Ramallah extends beyond the necessities of security and a working infrastructure, to a focus on education, and importantly the development of a strong and positive community identity, symbolized by the WeRamallah campaign featured in the film.

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/unispal/history/>

¹² <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/235735>

Ramallah on the International Stage

“You know? Despite everything we do I feel jealous sometimes. I feel jealous when I visit other cities. There’s so much they can do that we can’t. Not because we don’t want to, it’s just not in our hands.”

-Mayor Musa Hadid, *Mayor*

Mayor Hadid’s vision for the development of his and other Palestinian is frequently stymied by the limitations imposed by the Israeli occupation. As a result, he actively seeks international recognition and aid in order to support local development efforts. Though Mayor Hadid’s efforts are urgently necessary because of the occupation, his efforts have also been inspired by the international movement towards cities occupying a major role in policy decisions and actions that have influence on the global stage with regard to major challenges such as climate change, free trade, and human rights.¹³

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

In the documentary *Mayor* the Christian mayor of Ramallah, Musa Hadid asks, “How do you run a city without a country?” After watching this story, how would you answer this question? How does Mayor Hadid run his city?

In his statement, filmmaker David Osit says that Ramallah, “thoroughly pierces the Western narrative as to what “The Middle East” is “supposed” to look like.”

- What do you see as the most common Western Narrative about the Middle East?
- Do you agree with him that Ramallah represented in the film differs from that narrative? Why or why not?

LOCAL AND MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP

¹³ <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/11/city-diplomacy-has-been-on-the-rise-policies-are-finally.html>

From what you saw in the film, how would you describe the job of the Mayor of Ramallah? What are the day-to-day duties and concerns of the Mayor?

How does the role of a city's elected official differ from that of a national elected official with regard to considerations, duties, and responsibilities? Accountability? Other aspects of leadership?

What are your observations about the effectiveness of local governance and municipal services in Ramallah?

Think about Mayor Hadid's interactions with Ramallah's citizens on the street throughout the film. What do those interactions tell you about the nature of local leadership?

LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION

In the film, a Ramallah resident says, "I filed a report against the Israeli settlers because they're polluting our irrigation water. They burnt our olive trees and our water is all polluted. I filed a report but it's all in vain."

- In what ways does the Israeli occupation influence daily life of the people of Ramallah?
- How does it affect Mayor Hadid's ability to achieve his vision for Ramallah?

In response to officials from a German delegation suggesting that the Mayor ask Ramallah citizens to take part in a photo opportunity with Israeli youth "to educate the Israeli public," Mayor Hadid declines and shares,

"It's about dignity and when it comes to the dignity of yourself it's not acceptable. When we feel we are not treated as slaves and they are masters, we are ready to do everything. But, when I have to take my clothes off in front of all

the people under the threat of a 16 year old soldier and his weapon, then it's about dignity. When it comes to dignity it is something not negotiable.”

- What do you think the German delegation hoped Israelis would learn from the photo?
- What do you learn about the nature of Palestinian resistance to the occupation from his answer?

What scenes in *Mayor* make visible Israeli occupation? What are your reactions to these moments?

THE MEANING OF A CITY'S IDENTITY

What do you think the park and the fountain that Mayor Hadid works so hard to develop represents to him? To the people of Ramallah?

The film opens with a discussion about city branding. Mayor Hadid says, “City branding means that whenever you look at something in Ramallah, you automatically identify that it refers to Ramallah. Traffic lights. Sidewalks. Trees, street signs. This is city branding.”

- What do you think is the meaning of ‘city branding’?
- How does a city's brand influence the experience of a city's citizens?
- Why does a city's identity matter?

After watching the film, what suggestions might you make with regard to a city brand or slogan for Ramallah?

The Trump administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel becomes a major event in the film. What is the significance of a nation's capital city? How is that concept complicated in Ramallah, which is the administrative, but not the symbolic, capital of Palestine?

CLOSING QUESTION

What aspects of Ramallah are emblematic of cities anywhere? Of your city? What is different?

RESOURCES

“Making a Difference in the Midst of the Israeli Palestinian Conflict” [PBS Learning Media lesson](#) for High School classrooms

[Interactive Map of Occupied Territories](#) from B’Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories

PBS NewsHour Report about [The May, 2021 Israel/Gaza Conflict](#)

The University of Arizona’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies’ [educational outreach resources](#).

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our work at [Blueshift Education](#) is to develop curriculum, resources, and relevant tools to deepen understanding on social justice issues in order to empower people, foster empathy, and bring about meaningful and lasting change.

Discussion Guide Producer, POV

Courtney B. Cook, PhD | Education Manager