

Political Demonstration: Palestinian Supporters and Israeli Supporters

June 3, 2018

Tysons Corner Center, VA

We were invited to this event by one of the participants a few days before. They were concerned about their safety. The event was a celebration of Israel's independence at Tysons Corner Center and a demonstration for Palestinian rights. This is in the context of the recent U.S. political decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem and the killings of Palestinians in Gaza.

Angie, Makaya, and myself were able to make it. When Angie and I arrived we introduced ourselves to the Palestinian supporters who we saw coming off the Metro. We explained that we were invited to help prevent violence, defuse any intense flare-ups and build empathy between the groups. We gathered intel about their plans and some likely spots of intense interaction. The rain was pouring down so the outdoor celebration plan shifted to two indoor locations. The first one was Earl's restaurant and the later one was the Hyatt. We also spoke with a police officer to let him know who we were and he explained that signs could only be held on "public" property, i.e the Metro's property. We scouted out the area and then decided to enter the restaurant after we saw a handful of Palestinian supporters going in.

Inside the restaurant the Israeli group had a visible but private area blocked off near one of the bars. We got a table nearby to plan our strategy as Makaya arrived with his friend. Soon a group of 8 Palestinian supporters with noticeable clothing got a table in direct view of the Israeli group. Slowly, groups of Palestinian supporters began to gather right outside the restaurant in clear view of the Israeli group that was inside. We decided to have one person stay at our table to keep an eye on things inside while three of us went out to the entrance way and soon outside as the intensity gathered. Private mall security started to arrive and the local police were called in. About 100 Palestinian supporters were now outside with flags, balloons and some ad hoc signing/chanting as the police worked to keep the restaurant entrance opened. The intensity was building and the security officers seemed to be scrambling. Angie and I began to introduce ourselves to more police and Palestinian supporters. I stood right at the entrance where the police were trying to keep pro-Palestinians out of the way and a clear walkway on the side-walk. Various officers continued to yell instructions as the restaurant manager demanded they be moved. Makaya was filming various interactions as the scene intensified. I heard officers saying "we need to do something," "let's just move them," "let's form a wall," "let's just start arresting people." These were all actions which would of course intensify the conflict. Officers began to tell me to move with the crowd. I explained we weren't with the group but a non-partisan unarmed protection unit. They wondered and laid off a bit, although this exchange repeated a few times with different officers.

Soon a Lieutenant arrived and he looked angry. He pointed out a young man, about 20 years old, standing on a one foot ledge and went over to him aggressively. I moved closer to them about 6-7 feet away. He pointed up at the young man with an intense look on his face. The young man

seemed to verbally respond briefly in an inquisitive way. Then the Lt. grabbed him and wrestled him down while two or three other officers also grabbed him. The crowd started yelling, people were scrambling, officers tried to keep people back. I was about 3-4 feet away as they pushed him onto a bench. I expressed to the Lt. that he didn't give any warning before arresting them. Then I saw an officer put his arm around the young man's neck in a choke hold. I was quite nervous at this point as images of Eric Garner, i.e. "I can't breathe" came into my head. I stepped closer and said assertively to "get his arm off his neck. He is a human being. Treat him with respect." Then another officer stood in front of me with arms outstretched, yelling to "get back." I saw the fear in his face and turned my attention to him. I said "we see you as a human. We respect you. We want to honor your humanity." His face noticeably shifted as his eyes calmed and he looked at me directly, saying "ok, can you just stay back a bit." I complied and at this point they had cuffed another person nearby and started to push the two men away from the scene.

Meanwhile, the crowd was slowly moving back toward the metro walkway while others tried to negotiate with officers to cross the corner center for various reasons. I then saw an officer with a large tear-gas gun and asked why he had that? He said "don't worry about it." I said, "it was unnecessary and is only fueling the fear and likelihood of escalation." He turned his back and walked away a bit. Then another officer who was in a calm and congenial state engaged in dialogue. He talked about how they should just protest on public property by the street on the lower level. I offered the idea that their message was for the people in the restaurant. I wondered out loud about the justness of the law and the order for the demonstrators to be moved. He said that he watches the news and understood why the demonstrators were upset and he wasn't sure it was right to make them move. So we talked about conscience and responsibility. I asked about having a team of officers who engage with them in dialogue, so their anger, hurt, and fear could be heard. He thought about that and said he tried a bit earlier. But what if they had a team or unit focused on this before rather than the emphasis on armed threats to disperse?

The crowd moved down below, so our DCPT re-grouped in the restaurant briefly. Three of us went down to the street. They gathered, sang, chanted and held signs for the cars passing by as the police stayed next to them. Soon the same officer came up to me with some enthusiasm saying "see it worked out ok." We chatted some more about his ideas for better police training and non-lethal equipment, as well as about unarmed police in other countries, such as Britain, Norway, Scotland, etc. A pro-Palestinian demonstrator came up and asked, as I did earlier, "why did one of the officers nearby have that large tear-gas gun?"

By Eli McCarthy