

on the ground in ramallah

reports from a town become battlefield

The first day

On Wednesday, September 25 ... things blew up.

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There is only so much that one people can take. On Wednesday September 25, 1996, things blew up. I was in my office at Birzeit University that morning when the loud speakers began to wail. Students were trying to voice their anger and frustration about the opening of the now-infamous tunnel underneath the third holiest Islamic site. A strike was declared at the university in protest and busses were called in to shuttle students to Al Aqsa mosque where they could pray.

The news of the opening of the tunnel below and beside Al Aqsa mosque came in early Tuesday morning. The tunnel had been opened in the middle of the night "to avoid the heat of the day," an Israeli spokesman claimed. The opening of this tunnel is one more aggravation, one more humiliation, ... one violation too many for the Palestinian people. This is also Al Aqsa, the third holiest site in Islam. The "pressure cooker" that everyone has been talking about for so long began to explode. The "Peace" Accords that were supposed to bring peace to the area have been nothing more than a disappointing and humiliating experience for Palestinians.

Just outside Ramallah, on the way to Jerusalem, the students' busses were stopped by the Israeli army, and the students were prevented from passing through the Israeli checkpoint separating Areas A (areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority) and Area C (areas controlled by the Israeli authorities). Clashes broke out--students began throwing rocks, and the Israeli army started using rubber bullets--scores of students were injured by these bullets.

As the ambulances began to pour into the heart of Ramallah carrying the injured students, residents from the surrounding areas rushed in to join the protesting students. ...Then a molotov cocktail was thrown at the Israeli army. According to Israeli army regulations "once a molotov cocktail is used, the army is allowed to use live ammunition to protect itself".

The army opened fire with live ammunition, and scores more Palestinian protesters were injured. Then a Palestinian policeman manning a post near the Area A/Area C divider was hit with a live bullet. This is when the Palestinian police and army began to fire back. "I could not sit back and watch my friends and brothers getting razed by the Israelis and do nothing about it," one Palestinian soldier later told me.

Once the news of the fighting in Ramallah spread, fighting between Palestinians and the Israeli army