

International protests against assault on Palestinian Authority

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Mass protests have swept across the world in protest at Israel's murderous assault on the Palestinian Authority.

From the Middle East to Asia and Europe, tens of thousands have condemned the Israeli army's brutal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and demanded an end to the siege of Yasser Arafat in Ramallah. Their anger has been directed in equal measure against the regime of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the US administration of President George W. Bush, which is held responsible for enabling Israel's onslaught.

In the Lebanon, protests involving thousands of Palestinian refugees housed in squalid displacement camps have sprung up. Demonstrations took place in Rashidieh refugee camp, Bourj Shamali and Lebanon's largest camp and Ain Al-Hilweh on the outskirts of Sidon. Shop owners in Sidon closed their businesses on April 2 in order to join the protests, which were the largest by Palestinians in Lebanon since the 1991 Gulf War. Demonstrators chanted, "We want to blow up embassies if Arafat becomes a martyr. We want to hijack planes if Arafat becomes a martyr."

Such demonstrations are now a daily occurrence. Two days earlier in Sidon, 15,000 Lebanese and Palestinians demonstrated, setting fire to US and Israeli flags. Thousands of protestors attempted to march on the US embassy in Beirut, but were beaten back by police using tear gas and truncheons. An undisclosed number were injured.

Denunciations of the perfidy and cowardice of the Arab rulers has been another feature of protests in the Middle East. One report from a demonstration in a Lebanese refugee camp told of a 12-year-old girl grabbing a microphone and shouting, "(King) Abdullah, son of Hussein, you are worth only two bullets," a cry taken up by the rest of the protestors.

Protests have been especially violent in Jordan and Egypt, the only two countries in the Middle East to

maintain diplomatic links with Israel. In Jordan, where 60 percent of the country's five million population are Palestinian refugees, there were at least four major protests. In Zarqa, 27 kilometres northeast of Amman, some 3,000 people gathered, chanting "Death to Israel". Riot police using tear gas and water cannons attacked some 500 students demonstrating outside the university in Amman, who were demanding Jordan break off relations with Israel.

Similar police measures have been taken in Egypt, which is witnessing its most violent protests since Israel imprisoned Arafat. On April 2, *Al-Jazeera* reported that one million had taken to the streets. In Alexandria about 10,000 people demonstrated, whilst in Cairo, hundreds had responded to a call by artists and intellectuals to march from the city's university to the nearby Israeli Embassy. As protestors began to march, riot police used tear gas and water cannons to contain the students on campus. During the ensuing confrontation, which continued for seven hours, 30 protestors were arrested and 16 were hospitalised, mainly due to the effect of tear gas.

In Syria, a thousand Syrians and Palestinian refugees demonstrated, chanting "Terrorism is Zionist and the weapons are American!" In the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, 20,000 marched demanding "No peace with the Zionists". In Tripoli, Libyan leader Colonel Gadaffi led a demonstration of more than 20,000, whilst during protests in Iraq, encouraged by the ruling Ba'ath party, Saddam Hussein called on the Arab states to cut off oil supplies to the West.

In Yemen, more than 200 journalists gathered in front of the US embassy in Sanaa carrying pictures of Arafat. They handed an embassy official a letter accusing the US of bias toward Israel.

Protests were also held in Bangladesh, Bahrain and outside the Palestinian Embassy in Beijing.

In Indonesia, mass rallies were held on university

campuses and outside the US embassy in Jakarta, as well as in Java and in Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi province. A declaration by two militant Muslim groups that they would send fighters to the Middle East to join a holy war against Israel led Indonesia's top security minister to warn against the country's Muslims taking up arms. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono warned that whilst "the government understands the solidarity of Indonesian Muslims for their brethren in Palestine," any aid had "better not be physical."

In the US, protests were held in Washington, Los Angeles and Detroit. It was reported that the White House was bombarded with email messages from Arab Americans protesting the US failure to move against Israel. The email protest began after Jean Abadiner, managing director of the Arab American Institute, complained that the US, "is aiding and abetting Israel by sitting on its hands".

In Europe, some 7,000 demonstrated in Athens, Greece in one of a series of demonstrations held over the last days. Outside the Israeli embassy in the capital, demonstrators chanted, "Americans are assassins", whilst in the streets Palestinians and Greek activists marched, demanding "Freedom for Palestine".

More than 10,000 demonstrators marched in peace rallies throughout Germany on Monday. In Berlin, many of the 2,000 protestors were Palestinians and demonstrations in Hanover, Munich, Dusseldorf and Stuttgart also had sizeable Palestinian contingents.

Demonstrations were also held in Norway and Sweden. In Stockholm it was reported that violence had broken out after some of those participating in a march past the Israeli and US embassies attacked shops and destroyed Israeli-imported produce. In Sweden an opinion poll found that most people held Sharon responsible for the Middle East violence, but an even greater majority, 63 percent, felt that the US had done little to prevent it.

In France, which is home to the largest number of Muslims and Jews in Europe, pro-Palestinian protests have taken place throughout the country. In central Paris on April 2, 1,000 demonstrated against Sharon's war policy, whilst 6,000 joined pro-Palestinian rallies in Lyon, 3,000 in Lille and in Marseilles, around 2,000 shouted slogans against Sharon and Bush. Smaller demonstrations were also held in Bordeaux, Toulouse and Rennes.

There are signs that some of the protests are taking on an anti-Semitic character. During a protest organised by the Party of French Muslims (PMF) in Strasbourg, eastern France, organisers denounced from the platform some of

the participants who had began shouting anti-Jewish slogans. The protest was directed against Israel's policies, not the Jewish people, the organisers insisted.

Several Jewish establishments in Europe have been attacked in events thought to be related to Middle East events. In Berlin, two young Jews from New York were attacked by a group of seven or eight men after leaving a synagogue. The 21-year-olds were asked if they were Jewish and knocked to the floor and beaten.

In Belgium, Molotov cocktails were thrown at a synagogue in the Anderlecht district of Brussels but the most serious outbreaks of violence have been in France. Over the weekend a synagogue in Strasbourg were destroyed in a fire, another in Marseilles was burnt to the ground and a Lyon synagogue was rammed by two cars and set ablaze. A Jewish kosher butcher shop also came under fire. The French government has agreed to deploy more than 1,000 riot police to protect synagogues and Jewish sites around the country. The Palestinian Authority's representative in France, Leila Shahid, condemned the attacks as "unacceptable".

On April 2, in another example of how Middle East tensions are impacting in Europe, dozens of pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian protestors fought briefly at Paris' Orly airport. Both sides had gathered for the return of 11 French activists from Israel, including farmers' leader Jose Bove. All had been expelled from Israel after visiting Arafat in the Ramallah offices and joining protests against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank town. Reports say that a scuffle broke out briefly at the airport, with rival protestors throwing eggs and punches, and shouting "Killer Arafat!" or "Killer Sharon!" before being separated by police.



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