

Israeli protestors speak out against Sharon's war

Lena Sokoll
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Around 15,000 Israelis joined an anti-war protest in Tel Aviv on Saturday April 6. The march, made up of various pacifist and anti-Zionist organizations, started at 7.30pm, at Yitzak Rabin Square in central Tel Aviv and marched to the Ministry of Defense where a rally was held.

Moria Shlomot, director of Peace Now, stated that the peace coalition was insisting, "Israel must retreat from the occupied territories, evacuate the settlements and put up a border between Israel and the Palestinians while returning to the negotiating table towards a firm peace agreement."

People of all ages attended the protest but the majority were young, aged 20-35. Banners were carried, reading, "End the occupation—get out of the territories", "Stop Sharon's war", "Stop the massacres", "Free Palestine", "Sharon is a war criminal", "Bush/USA—an accomplice in the war", "The IDF is a terrorist organization".

This reporter did not see any Israeli flags on the demonstration, which is unusual. The Peace Coalition, set up by Peace Now, the liberal Meretz party, various Labour Party "doves", the Kibbutz Ha'artzi movement and others, defines itself explicitly as patriotic and Zionist. In former events Peace Now argued that it is essential to raise the Israeli flag, because "otherwise it would become the property of the extreme right and the settlers". Peace Now and Meretz also insisted on the national anthem "Hatikva" being sung at the end of protests in order to show loyalty to the Zionist state and prove their patriotism. The speakers' platform itself was decorated with flags.

A measure of the pressure placed on opponents of the war was the response of one man on the demonstration, who was one of the first signatories to the letter written by officers refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories. He was an anti-Zionist and was eager to discuss the situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He agreed to do an interview on condition that his real name was not used, since many leaders of the peace movement regard giving interviews—particularly to the foreign press—as virtual treason and the refuseniks amongst the reservists are forbidden to talk to the press at all. Unfortunately when he

was met again, he had decided or been persuaded to obey the unwritten laws of the refusenik movement.

A number of demonstrators were more than willing to make their views known:

Maya, 27, is a nurse. She told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"I am here to protest against the war and the occupation. Negotiations are the only way to achieve peace, I think. I don't know how peace can be achieved, but I know for sure that this war has to end and that this road will never lead to peace. The Israeli army has to get out of the territories and Israel has to give up the settlements. I have brothers and friends in the army. I don't want them to kill and I don't want them to be killed. I don't want them to die for nothing. I see it as my duty to come here and protest against this horrible war."

Maram, 25, is a student:

"I am here to demand the end of the occupation and the killings. There are many more things I want to say, but first of all and in this place I'm protesting against the occupation and the killings. Also we have to fight to change the government. Maybe we'll be able to do it. Sharon has been too long at the head of the state. It's high time to end his government. We will never achieve peace while Sharon is in power that's for sure. But we have to stop the killings right now. Only then we will live in peace with the Palestinians.

"I believe there are many more people who think like us, but until now they don't go to the streets and voice their protest. We cannot wait for the elections. Our protest is necessary in order to wake up those who don't agree with Sharon's politics, to change the government and to show the world that the majority of the people in this country don't think that war is the way to solve problems.

"To see the Labour Party and [Foreign Secretary Shimon] Peres backing Sharon's politics is very depressing. It's sad but they are not a Labour Party anymore. They just call themselves the Labour Party, but they are not. I know there are many members of the Labour Party who don't agree with these politics and who want their party to leave the

government, but the mainstream of the party still wants to stay in the Sharon government.

“We have to end the occupation to achieve peace. That’s the only solution. The end of the occupation will be the end of suicide bombings. I also think that we have to separate the country and create a Palestinian state, because in a Jewish state Palestinians will never have the same rights and freedom as the Jewish population.”

Lydia, 38, is a university professor:

“Even if there is no peace, the IDF [Israeli Defence Force] have to get out of the territories and end the occupation, for the occupation is just horrible. I’m quite pessimistic about the chance of making a peace agreement right now, but the occupation is wrong anyway so my first demand is to get the army out.

“I wish I knew exactly what Sharon is up to, but I think he wants to build up a puppet-leadership for the Palestinians that will be under Israeli control.

“It’s not only this particular leadership, it’s the political structure within Israel. I don’t see a leader or political party that is able to break down the status quo within Israel and really settle a peace agreement. The only slim hope is this movement here.”

Regeb, 29, is a student:

“I’m demonstrating here against state-terrorism, Israel’s state-terrorism. Israel is now going to war and I don’t see that the Sharon-government is able to achieve peace or sign a peace-agreement.

“I heard today that a massacre in a refugee camp in Jenin is taking place, with a hundred people dead. The international pressure that is put on the Sharon government right now actually makes things worse, because the chief of command now wants to finish his plans in the short time that is left for him to do so. No medical treatment is available to the people in the camps. It is already a disaster and it will become worse.

“I hope the people in Israel are waking up now. They know what war is like and they now see these pictures of war again that they have seen so many times in the history of Israel. I only hope that there will be pressure by the citizens on the government to end this war.

“My personal wish would be to create a state where all the people of the region can live together, but it will take a long time—maybe 50 years—to establish such a state. Right now, I think, there is no other way than to establish a Palestinian state. The Palestinians need freedom. No one ever in human history could defeat people who fight for their freedom. Sharon and the chief of the IDF don’t understand this. Israel has a stupid leadership.

“No, actually they are not stupid, but rather terrorists. The leadership of this country is made up of terrorists. They are

shooting at civilians, killing them. In the last few days the police has been acting against the law. They are using violence against peace demonstrations. I think you can already see fascist elements in Israeli society and they are starting to grow and this is very frightening. But no one will stop us. No one will silence us. We will protest and protest and protest until peace is established here.”

Daniel, 58, is a computer programmer:

“Every important party, such as the government of Israel, should say what they can do immediately to alleviate the most severe problems. If the most severe problem of the Palestinians is that they have soldiers roaming around their cities and marching into houses, this should stop immediately. Get the army out of the cities and back to Israel. This is an obvious thing.

“A peaceful future, a peaceful existence in the Middle East, is a bit like something we saw here many years ago. Some of us are too young to remember. But there were years when Arabs used to go to Jewish streets and Jews likewise used to buy in Arab stores. People lived side by side, knocking on each others doors, making friends, going to the movies together. This can all happen again and is has to be like that again.

“A secular state would be a very nice thing to have and I would be very happy to be a citizen in such a country. I don’t know if this is very easy to establish. At least in the first stage it seems easier if every community would organize itself independently, with its own institutions, and establish a free and friendly and peaceful relationship and cooperation and later decide how we want to live together.

“I was born in Haifa, which is the third largest city in Israel, when it was a joint Arab-Jewish state. I was born when everybody was living peacefully in that city. In 1948 the crisis began and the city became no longer so unified and the Arabs fled. There was an invasion into Israel, which was repelled, and when it was repelled the Arab population mostly fled and from that moment on it was no longer easy.

“I’m 58 now and in my spare time I try to reestablish the peaceful things that used to be here and that should come back again.”



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