

Israel: Demonstrations in Tel Aviv and Haifa against occupation of Palestine territories and Iraq

David Cohen
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Almost 1,500 Jewish and Arab demonstrators gathered near Tel Aviv's Central Train Station to protest against the occupation of Iraq and in defence of Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories. The crowd shouted slogans like "The Occupation Is Terror, The Refusenik is Hero." The popular singer Aviv Gefen sang, "Let's bury the guns, not the children." He continued, "Let's march to the dream, with no race and national difference. Let's occupy the peace, not the territories." He slammed Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and got applause from the crowd.

The protest rally was organised by various peace organisations, political groups and human rights activists. The protest rally began as a march in North Tel Aviv City when demonstrators shouted, "We will not be killed and not kill in the service of the settlements!" while raising black and red flags. Hundreds of placards were raised, amongst them, "Those who refuse to do peace imprison those who refuse to occupy," "I refuse to oppress," etc. A section of parents of nine non-Jewish soldiers who refuse to serve in the Israeli Occupation Forces raised placards saying, "My son won't serve in the occupation and oppression army."

Several peace activists delivered speeches. Noa Kaufman, representative of 300 high school pupils who face being imprisoned because of their refusal to serve in the Israeli army, said, "We all refuse to occupy—men and women, youth and elders. There are many ways to refuse to aid the occupation besides refusing to take orders in the army. Refusal to be part of oppression, killing and brutality is also to send gifts to hospitals and not to soldiers."

Former education minister Shulamit Aloni denounced the army's central attorney, Menahem Finkelstein, who carries forward the campaign of the army against the refuseniks through ongoing detentions and mass trials in the army's courts.

Itay Riv, spokesman from the "Yesh Gvul" (There is a Border) movement, spoke on his mobile phone from his prison cell and his speech was broadcast by Megaphone: "I had two choices: to be a prison guard in a giant jail that Israel provides to millions of Palestinians, or to be prisoner myself. Here in the jail I can be peaceful with my conscience and know that I'm fighting the occupation."

Ishtay Sagi from the Courage to Refuse movement said, "A short time ago I was invited to reserve duties in the army, and I got direct orders from my commander to arrive at the military base in the Occupied Territories and I refused. I preferred with no doubt to be imprisoned.... I am wearing here a T-shirt with my state's flag because this is my flag and I won't leave it to the settlers and the right wing."

A group of demonstrators shouted at him, "Zionism is racism!"

The poet Yitzhak Leor called on the demonstrators to come to the Occupied Territories not as soldiers but as peace activists who try to prevent actions of oppression, as Rachel Corrie did.

Dr Anat Matar, the mother of Hagay Matar, a young soldier who will be tried soon in the military court, called on the participants to come to the trials of her son and five of his close friends. She called on the demonstrators to participate in the antiwar march in the city of Haifa. "Contrary to the things which have been published, the war in Iraq is not over, the killing did not

stop, and it is still a cynical war for American hegemony in the region and in the world and for control of oil wealth.”

Sara, 24, is a student to history at the University of Haifa. She told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I am deeply concerned that we can’t develop this antiwar and anti-occupation movement from protest to real political movements. There are here Zionists, anti-Zionists, communists, liberals, anarchists, workers, youth, students, women, Arabs and others. But when it comes to real action not only against but also for something, we fail to do it. I think that the traditional political parties are bankrupt and we need to find a way to build a new political party that will concentrate around its platform all those who are tired of simply ongoing protest. How can we abolish the regime here and how can overthrow Sharon and Netanyahu without transforming our protest power to political power?”

Ahmed, 31, works in the building industry: “I don’t want to separate our forces instead of uniting them, but when a Zionist refusenik comes here with the Israeli national symbol—Israel’s flag—he causes only damage to us. How can you protest against the war on Iraq with America’s flag? How can you demonstrate against the occupation of Baghdad while you are saying God Save the Queen? Thus, how can you protest against demolition of houses in Ramallah or against the brutal assassination policy with a Zionist symbol? The Zionists, even the most leftist Zionists, thinks that we will participate in their events anyway. They provoke frustration.”

Elad, 22, is member of the *Courage to Refuse* movement. He said, “We want to win the support of the vast majority in Israel who voted for Sharon. It is easy to remain a small block of anti-occupation activists who are confident that they’re right and the rest of the world is wrong. But radicalism cannot win even one supporter from the Likud, and even from the Labor, to our side without declaring: yes, we are Zionists and Zionism isn’t occupation; it is peace and the right of self-determination of Jews - and Palestinians. If you’re against Zionism, you can easily move to the US. There is much more to change in American society. In London, millions of demonstrators marched against the war. Here we are hundreds, sometimes thousands, in our good periods tens of thousands. So are you going to change the reality or prove to the rest of the society that

you are right and remain a tiny minority?”

Odelya, 33, heard Elad’s interview and replied. “In Germany of 1940, the majority of the population stood with Adolph Hitler. If you were German citizens, would you say ‘Yes, I am loyal to the Third Reich and I’m a Nazi, but it is not good to execute hundreds of thousands of Jews’? Or would you join the partisans or the resistance and fight the Nazis?”

“I was in the Occupied Territories and I saw how they’re living in ghettos and concentration camps. I think that you don’t want to see what is really going on and thus you’re dreaming that if you’ll be patriotic enough you’ll win supporters from our Nazi ruling party. No, you are wrong my friend. Our job is to defend our Arab sisters and brothers as best we can and not to be loyal to our oppressor state. Anyway, you know that you’re a minority and most of your friends support the regime here. In the meantime, the bloodshed continues and the national flag is being spotted with Arab blood.”

In Haifa almost 500 demonstrators, Arabs and Jews, gathered to oppose the imperialist war against Iraq. The demonstration was organised by political parties and different groups for peace, human and civil rights. The Zionist left, including leftist tendencies within Israel’s Labour party and the social-democratic Meretz party, did not participate in the demonstration.

Militant Arab youth shouted slogans against the US, British and Israeli governments, accusing them of causing suffering and bloodshed for the peoples in the region and protesting against the massacres in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, towns and villages. The demonstration was held near Haifa’s port in which American and British ships are anchored.



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