

Antiwar protests in Israel

Mike Head
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If one were to judge by the international media, the Israeli government's assault on Lebanon and Gaza enjoys the virtually unanimous support of the Israeli population. In so far as Israeli citizens have been interviewed, they have been invariably in favour of war, insisting that it provides the only means of protecting the Israeli people.

Despite a barrage of pro-war propaganda in the Israeli media, however, visible opposition has begun to appear. Some 2,000 people marched in Israel's commercial capital of Tel Aviv on Sunday to demand prisoner exchange negotiations with the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah, and an end to the offensive against Lebanon.

"Yes to Peace," "Stop the War Monstrosity," "Say No to the Brutal Bombardments on Gaza" and "Our Children Want to Live" were among the calls from the mixed crowd of Jewish and Arab demonstrators organised by several Israeli anti-war groups.

They also accused Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defence Minister Amir Peretz of murdering children and carrying out war crimes in complicity with American policy. The slogans included "Olmert Agreed With Bush: War and Occupation" and "Peretz, Don't Worry, We'll be Seeing You at The Hague."

For all the claims of democracy in Israel, the rally received almost no coverage in the local and international media and was dispersed by police within two hours. Police arrested three protesters, claiming they were holding a demonstration without a permit.

Some of the marchers interviewed for Ynet, an Israeli web site, expressed their horror at the outrages being committed in their names. Eitan Lerner said: "Israel is entering another cycle of fighting and continues the foolishness of exaggerated aggression. I came here to protest because there's a link between starving and oppressing the Palestinians and the bombings in Lebanon."

Manal Amuri, from Jerusalem, said: "What Israel is doing now has resulted in the deaths of civilians, innocent children, and it serves no purpose except for the government's vindictiveness. I think it's good we're showing that there are Arab and Jewish citizens in Israel who oppose the war."

Abeer Kopty referred to the intensive efforts being made to stampede public opinion. "They keep telling us that there is a consensus in support of the war, and that's not true. They keep telling the citizens that this is the only way, and I think that there is another way."

A women's protest was also held on Sunday, next to the central Haifa train depot where a Hezbollah rocket landed earlier that day, killing eight people. The women said that in the coming days, they would be assembling a new group of Arab and Jewish women

against the war.

Several days earlier, only a few hours after the start of the attack on Lebanon, 200 people picketed the Defence Ministry in Jerusalem. According to Adam Keller of the peace movement Gush Shalom, writing on *Al Jazeera* on July 15, the demonstrators responded to an e-mail sent by a group of young people.

Under the headline, " 'Summer Rains' Precipitate a Flood of Blood!" the e-mail accused the government of using "cruel military force and collective punishment against the civilian populations of Gaza and Lebanon."

It continued: "The latest events in Gaza and Lebanon are directly related to the government of Israel's campaign against the elected leadership of the Palestinian people. This policy prevents any chance of creating a channel of communications and diplomatic negotiations with our neighbours, and leaves the arena to those who want endless fighting."

On the picket, the slogans chanted included: "Peretz—You Promised Education and Pensions, And All We Got Is Tanks and Dead Bodies!", "Peretz, Peretz, Minister of Defence / You have Killed Seven Children Today!" and "Jews and Arabs / Refuse to be Enemies!"

These sentiments undoubtedly reflect wider anxieties about being dragged into a wider war, as well as deep-seated distrust in the coalition government cobbled together by Olmert's Kadima Party and Peretz's Labour Party after national elections in March. For now, the pro-war atmosphere dominating the media and the political establishment has largely drowned these voices out, but the underlying social and class tensions wracking the Zionist state are building up just below the surface.

Writing on the Arabic Media Internet Network, Uri Avnery of Gush Shalom commented on the stifling of anti-war sentiment. "The public is not enthusiastic about the war. It is resigned to it, in stoic fatalism, because it is being told that there is no alternative. And indeed, who can be against it? Who does not want to liberate the 'kidnapped soldiers'?... In the media, the generals reign supreme, and not only those in uniform. There is almost no former general who is not being invited by the media to comment, explain and justify, all speaking in one voice."

Despite this concerted campaign, a number of commentators have drawn attention to the cracks appearing in the official justifications for the military onslaught. On the same web site, Gilad Atzmon, an Israeli-born musician and writer living in Jordan, noted:

"Although both Palestinian militants and Hezbollah were originally targeting legitimate military targets, Israeli retaliation

was clearly aiming against civilian targets, civil infrastructures and mass killing directed against an innocent population. It doesn't take a genius to realise that this is not really the way to win a war or confront that particular sort of combat known as guerrilla warfare."

Haaretz columnist Gideon Levy wrote on July 17: "Regrettably, the Israel Defence Forces once again looks like the neighbourhood bully. A soldier was abducted in Gaza? All of Gaza will pay. Eight soldiers are killed and two abducted to Lebanon? All of Lebanon will pay. One and only one language is spoken by Israel, the language of force...."

"In Gaza, a soldier is abducted from the army of a state that frequently abducts civilians from their homes and locks them up for years with or without a trial—but only we're allowed to do that. And only we're allowed to bomb civilian population centres."

In a column posted on July 16, Shmuel Rosner, chief US correspondent for *Haaretz*, pointed out that in October 2000, just months after Israel ended its 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon, three Israeli soldiers were abducted from the border area. Ehud Barak, Labour prime minister at the time, decided to let it pass—an approach repeated several times by his Likud successor, Ariel Sharon—in order to avoid opening a "second front" in addition to the one in the Palestinian territories.

Rosner attributed the change in policy to the levels of frustration that had built up among Israelis with the country's political and military leadership. "You can hear them on every street corner, in every cafe, and in almost every living room: people of the right and the left, young and old, from north and south—frustrated, toughened, disillusioned...."

"In this atmosphere, no military officer and no civilian decision-maker can even think about restraint. Reaching at least one of the two goals they set for this current operation in Lebanon—bringing the soldiers back home and 'changing to rules of the game,' meaning no more Hezbollah militias on the Israeli border—will decide not only the future of the northern front but also the political future of Israel's leaders."

This assessment ignores the backing given to the Israeli aggression by the United States, not to speak of the entire cycle of war launched by the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet Rosner's references to the popular frustration and the uncertain political future of the Olmert-Peretz government are revealing.

A major factor propelling the militarism of the Zionist administration is the need to divert the disaffection and social polarisation generated by the government's anti-working class programme of "market reforms" and welfare cuts.

Last November, Peretz, a former national trade union chief, unexpectedly defeated the veteran Shimon Peres in a Labour party leadership contest. Peretz won by pledging to end the conflict with the Palestinians through a negotiated settlement and to look after the interests of ordinary Israeli families hard hit by Sharon's Likud-Labour government.

Peretz withdrew Labour's cabinet members from Sharon's coalition, triggering a realignment of Israeli politics. In a bid to regain support, Sharon was joined by Peres in setting up a new party, Kadima, and calling national elections last March. But in what amounted to a stunning repudiation, Kadima—led by

Sharon's successor Olmert—failed to win a majority, while Likud's rump was routed.

Sharon's measures had caused such hostility that his finance minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who took over as Likud leader, unsuccessfully sought to apologise during the election campaign for the social pain he had inflicted.

Led by the left-talking Peretz, Labour profited from this opposition, together with a new pro-welfare party, the Pensioners Party, and Shas, whose base is the predominantly working class ultra-orthodox Sephardim (Middle Eastern Jews).

However, having campaigned against the cuts in welfare and family payments implemented by the Sharon government, the three parties promptly joined the Kadima-led government, regardless of Olmert's stated intention to continue the pro-business measures. In particular, the government is determined to see wages fall further in order to make Israel "internationally competitive."

This programme has included privatisations and tax handouts to benefit the wealthy, accompanied by cuts in social benefits such as unemployment, child and insurance benefits, and income assistance, and a rise in the pension age as well as restrictions on the right to strike.

These measures have already brought unemployment and poverty to increasing numbers of workers and their families and given Israel one of the highest rates of inequality in the world, second only to the US in the advanced countries. According to the National Insurance Institute, the richest households have 14 times more income than the poorest, while one quarter of the 6 million population live below the poverty level, and 1 in 5 children go hungry every day.

While billions of US dollars have been poured into military spending to sustain the war against the Palestinians and an expansion of subsidised settlements in the occupied territories, most Israeli workers and their families have seen their living standards decline.

Aided by Peretz, Olmert and his military generals are intent on channeling the rising discontent into fratricidal warfare against the impoverished Lebanese and Palestinian masses. But the conditions are emerging for growing numbers of Israeli youth and workers to realise that the Zionist project of a national home for the Jews and refuge from persecution has turned into a nightmarish dead end.



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