

# Protests over social conditions continue in Israel

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10 August 2011

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, faces his biggest political crisis since taking power more than two years ago, as protests continue following last Saturday's demonstrations. More than a quarter of a million people took to the streets Saturday to protest the soaring cost of living, and thousands protesting high housing costs are continuing to camp out in tent cities in Israel's major cities.

The protest organizers, mainly young people, have called for a million-person march in 50 cities across the country on September 3.

In Tel Aviv, the economic heart of the country, hundreds of pensioners rallied outside the city government on Monday, demanding the government lower medicine costs, cancel value-added taxes on basic necessities, and prevent a cut in their pensions. Gideon Ben Yisrael, the head of the pensioners' union, told *Ha'aretz* that the pensioners identified with the nation-wide social struggle against housing costs and the cost of living, but were also demanding solutions to their problems.

Dozens of non-profit and social organizations are to hold an emergency conference to formulate their recommendations to the Dialogue Committee set up by Netanyahu last weekend, under the leadership of Israeli economist Manuel Trajtenberg.

Netanyahu's coalition government, the most right-wing in Israel's history, is incapable of addressing the social grievances of the Israeli people. He has refused to meet with the protesters personally, instead delegating the task of "listening" to the Dialogue Committee.

This is an entirely cosmetic exercise aimed at diffusing the protest movement, while expending no more resources overall on the population's social needs. Netanyahu and Trajtenberg have already agreed that the committee's recommendations must stay within the government's budget. Any changes would only reorder "internal priorities" and would have to be approved by the social cabinet headed by Yuval Steinitz, the Finance Minister, who has adamantly refused to increase the taxes of the billionaire oligarchs and business elite.

In contrast, according to the latest National Insurance Institute report, 23 percent of Israel's population lives below the official poverty line and 29 percent are in danger of falling below it—that is, the majority, 52 percent, are in fact desperately poor.

In a new development, Israelis living in the US and Germany organised protests via Facebook in solidarity with the tent cities and rallies in Israel. According to the organisers, up to 200 people joined a rally in Los Angeles. They claimed that the soaring cost of living had led hundreds of thousands of Israelis to relocate to the US.

Other rallies were held in Washington DC and New York. In New York, Omri Ariav, an Israeli law student who organised the rally while on a visit to family in New York, explained, "In the past year I did more than 30 days of active reserve duty [in the army]. I can barely keep a car and a rented apartment with a roommate."

In Germany, 30 Israelis living in Berlin set up an encampment outside the Israeli embassy in the German capital on Monday, in a show of solidarity with housing protesters in Israel. They too said that the high cost of living and rising housing prices had led them to leave Israel.

After more than three weeks of protests, there are signs that the Israeli authorities are trying to break up the movement.

On Sunday, demonstrators from the tent city in Independence Park in Jerusalem called for public housing in front of Amidar, the state owned public housing company. The demonstrators living in Independence Park are all single parents. Many are now homeless, after being evicted from their apartments for failing to keep up with their rent. The police moved in forcefully to break up the demonstration and arrested 10 of them.

One of the protesters, Maya Zigov, told *Ha'aretz* that it was not the first time that she and her children, the youngest is only 2 years old, had lived in a tent. "Five years ago, I was evicted from an Amidar apartment, and I was in a tent for three

months,” she said. “I spent that entire time during the winter in the rain. In the end I got to an apartment and the owner wanted NIS 2,200 in rent. Now they want NIS 3,200, but I can’t pay that when my salary is barely NIS 3,000.”

There are about 10,000 citizens and a further 50,000 new immigrants and their families waiting for public housing—a wait that could last more than six years in the big cities. While there are subsidies for those forced to rent in the private sector while waiting for public housing, these subsidies (NIS 1,250 per month) are totally inadequate.

The same day, Ron Huldai, the mayor of Tel Aviv, made a veiled threat against the protest movement. He told reporters at a press conference that the tent city set up on Rothschild Boulevard to protest high housing prices had a “limited lifespan” and would eventually come to an end. Huldai did not rule out the possibility that the municipal authorities would eventually evacuate the protesters.

Huldai added: “This is not for generations to come—do you know any cities where all its streets are full of tents? This is a protest, and all protests eventually end.”

The next day, the Tel Aviv authorities removed a caravan parked by the National Union of Israeli Students near the Rothschild Boulevard tent city, just hours after obtaining a demolition order for the structure.

On Tuesday, officials in northern Tel Aviv tried to remove tents in two different tent camp sites. They removed three of the 30 tents at the Ben-Gurion site, but left when challenged to provide an eviction notice. Municipal officials accompanied an outside contractor to remove the tents in the Nordau Boulevard camp site, where there are more than 50 tents. They did not have an eviction order, either, and left when they saw a TV camera.

When the attempted evictions received widespread publicity, the Tel Aviv municipality sought to calm tensions by claiming that it had no intention of evicting the tent cities.

The growing political storm has prompted the Knesset (parliament) to break from its summer recess and hold a special session to discuss the situation this week or next. Moreover, Reuven Rivlin, the Knesset Speaker, said that he thought it was unlikely that the current Knesset would see out its four-year term. Elections are due in November 2013.

The Netanyahu government for its part is whipping up tensions against the Palestinian people and its Arab neighbours, as a diversion from the growing social unrest.

On Sunday, Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s foreign minister and leader of the ultra-right Israel Beiteinu party—a key prop of Netanyahu’s government coalition—demanded that Israel cut off all contact with the Palestinian Authority. He accused it of preparing unprecedented “bloodshed,” in a bid to gain international recognition for independent statehood at the UN General Assembly in September.

Lieberman made his provocative claims without providing a shred of evidence, contradicting a parliamentary report released last week that said Israeli intelligence officials did not expect Palestinian violence to break out. While officials have recommended calling up military reservists in case of clashes, the Palestinian Authority has ordered its security forces to prevent any demonstrations from escalating into violent confrontations with Israel.

Israel has also deployed drones over the gas fields off its northern coast in the eastern Mediterranean to which both Israel and Lebanon lay claim. Israel has submitted a map of its proposed maritime borders with Lebanon, which gives Israel 854 square kilometres (330 square miles) more territory than the one Lebanon submitted last year, to the United Nations for adjudication. The two fields in the disputed area, Tamar and Leviathan, are believed to hold at least 8.4 trillion cubic feet of gas (238 billion cubic metres) and 16 trillion cubic feet (450 billion cubic metres), respectively.

Hezbollah said that “The Israeli enemy cannot drill a single metre in these waters to search for gas and oil if the zone is disputed... No company can carry out prospecting work in waters whose sovereignty is contested”. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, “The decision to deploy drones was made in order to maintain a 24-hour presence over the site” as a warning to Hezbollah.



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