

Israeli police arrest social protest movement leader and break up demonstrations

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On Friday, a few hundred activists attempted to set up a tent city again on Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard. Riot police moved in forcefully to prevent them from occupying the boulevard, a sign that the Israeli authorities are determined that there be no mass protests again this year.

Five police officers seized Daphne Leif, one of the leaders of last year's social protest movement that saw 500,000 people take to the streets. They pinned her down and beat her, before dragging her along the street, throwing her into a police van and taking her to the police station. Leif was later released on bail. She said that police officers had bruised and humiliated her.

Municipal inspectors and Tel Aviv mayor Ron Huldai's "Green Patrol" helped the police push back the protesters, arresting another 12. Huldai, a former brigadier general, had taken part in last year's protests. The violent scenes were photographed and widely distributed, causing widespread outrage.

On Saturday evening, up to 7,000 people gathered in Habima Square in downtown Tel Aviv to voice their opposition to the detention of the 12 activists, Leif's arrest, and police behaviour. They chanted slogans demanding social justice and opposing police brutality, while others condemned the close ties between Israeli politicians and big business. Some opposed the occupation and defended Palestinian rights, with one banner reading, "Democracy for All, from the Jordan to the Sea".

The police responded swiftly and with force to break up the demonstration, claiming that it was illegal as it had not been cleared with the authorities first. Angry scuffles and clashes broke out, as youth battled with the police.

Eggs were hurled at Tel Aviv's City Hall. A few made for the banks, vandalising an ATM and smashing the windows of two others. There were reports of one incident in which activists tried to get into a bank and set up a tent, the symbol of last year's protests.

The police arrested 85 people, of whom at least 37 were to be charged with offences. Tel Aviv district police commander Aharon Eksol justified his response with the claim, "Every possible red line was crossed here. We will pursue this to the full extent of the law."

He added ominously, "Our instructions to our police officers are to use measured force, but our police officers were barraged with rocks and stones, were spat on and hit. I don't know of any way to get people off a road against their will without using force."

On Sunday, in a separate incident, about 200 protesters in Jerusalem attempted to block the path of the new and highly contentious light railway and were forcibly removed by police. Two people were arrested. In Haifa, dozens protested against police brutality and called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to resign.

In Tel Aviv, at the court hearing of 14 people who were charged with disturbing the peace and rioting, the police tried to prevent the protesters' release on bail, but the judge overruled them. Judge Tzachi Uziel said that they had no criminal records and they should be released until the proceeding against them came to a close. He warned that freedom of expression and the right to protest were "basic rights" but said they were "not unlimited".

The police decided to indict 37 of the protesters arrested in Saturday's demonstration. According to the detainees' legal representative, police officers could not specify the reason for the arrests, forcing their release.

Stav Shaffir, a student leader who was one of the organisers of last year's protests, said that "the violence was extremely harsh; awful, some protesters had their heads smashed against the pavement. We saw some protesters' faces bleeding. I think that if you examine the arrested protesters' arms you'd see them all covered with bruises." He refuted police claims that the protestors were violent and said this was slanderous.

Shelly Yachimovich, recently elected Labour Party leader and leader of the Opposition, made clear her support for the police alongside a plea for them to allow some protests as a safety valve. She said that "vandalism and violence must be met with a strong hand, but it's no less dangerous to democracy to stifle every hint of legitimate, non-violent, protest."

The authorities' response to these relatively small protests marks a change from its more conciliatory approach last year. Since then, the government has ignored the paltry recommendations of its specially convened committee, made within the limits of the government's budget, calling for some limited increases in welfare and a cut in defence spending.

Netanyahu's Likud-led coalition now has an overwhelming majority in the Knesset thanks to the opposition Kadima joining it recently. At the same time, the Labour Party and the Histadrut trade union federation are open advocates of big business and experts at directing workers' struggles into a dead end.

For months, the police have refused to give permits for rallies and marches, using delaying tactics and threats of arrest and force should unlicensed demonstrations take place. In effect, the authorities are seeking to make protests illegal. At the same time, the government is resorting to the tried and tested techniques of chauvinism and racism to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment against African asylum seekers it is seeking to deport.

In the last week, it has carried out numerous raids on Gaza, citing as justification the firing of makeshift rockets into Israel—which is now largely protected from such rockets by its Iron Dome air defence system. Since last Monday, Israeli firepower has killed 15 Palestinians and wounded several dozen others. Netanyahu said that Israeli troops would step up their response if the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip did not abide by their promised ceasefire. This latest round of

violence started after gunmen from Sinai carried out an operation on Israel's southern border with Egypt, killing an Israeli civilian.

In addition to its constant warmongering against Iran, which it has threatened with air strikes to wipe out its nuclear facilities, Israel is becoming more aggressive against Syria. Tel Aviv claims that Damascus has a huge arsenal of weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, high-trajectory long-range rockets and missiles, and biological and chemical weapons, which it fears could fall into Hezbollah's hands should Syria's president, Bashar al Assad, fall. It says that they pose as great a threat to Israeli security as Iranian nuclear development.

Earlier this year, an Israeli defence official warned that a transfer of chemical weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon would be tantamount to a declaration of war by the Lebanese government, and that Israel would act to prevent such a move.



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