

Thousands protest in Israel calling for an end to the bombing of Gaza

Jean Shaoul

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Israelis joined millions of people throughout the world, opposing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's genocidal war against the Palestinian people, taking to the streets in several towns and cities to demand the government end the war and do everything necessary to bring home the 230 hostages being held in Gaza.

In Tel Aviv, hundreds of angry young protesters gathered outside the headquarters of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on Saturday evening holding banners saying, "Ceasefire now" and "Bring back the hostages, alive, now."

Haim Rubinstein, for the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, demanded, "Is there a plan? We don't know. That's what we want to find out." She added, "We also want to know the meaning of what happened last night," referring to the IDF ground invasion of Gaza and the bombardment of 150 Hamas underground targets, including tunnels where the hostages are believed to be held.

Hundreds demonstrated outside Netanyahu's home in Caesarea, accusing him of responsibility for the war, demanding he resign and chanting, "Take responsibility for the sake of the people." At a demonstration in Jerusalem, banners called for a prisoner exchange. Hundreds took part in a rally in the northern port city of Haifa, home to both Jews and Palestinians, with other rallies held in Beersheba, Herzlyia, Netanya and Kfar Saba and other towns.

Supporters held at least 20 vigils for the hostages' families and memorials for those killed around the country on Saturday night.

These protests followed a rally Tuesday when hundreds protested in Tel Aviv, demanding the government secure the release of the hostages. At an earlier rally on October 14, angry demonstrators turned on Netanyahu, chanting "Go to jail, Bibi! [Netanyahu's

nickname]" and "Leave." Placards read, "Bibi, you have blood on your hands," "We've been abandoned," "Return the hostages immediately," and "There's no trust, quit." They accused Netanyahu and his government of being more interested in their own survival than the Israeli people.

While these protests are small and reflect a Zionist opposition to the Netanyahu government, they are indicative of growing concerns about the purpose and direction of the war that threatens to escalate across the region, putting the survival of the state itself at risk.

The scale of the destruction of Gaza is unprecedented. More than 8,000 people have been killed, including 3,000 children, more than 1,700 women, and dozens of families killed together when their houses collapsed on them. More than 17,000 people have been injured, with another 2,000 still missing under the rubble. At least 16,000 residential units have been destroyed and a further 11,000 made uninhabitable.

At the same time, the US is surging troops, warships and aircraft to the Middle East to be deployed against Iran and its allies, Hezbollah, Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. The Biden administration is not only supporting Israel's war against Gaza and inflaming public opposition to US imperialism and its Arab allies who have not lifted a finger to defend the Palestinians, but providing the weapons Israel is using to carry out attacks on Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank.

On Saturday, representatives of families with relatives held hostage in Gaza met Netanyahu and urged him to agree to an "everyone for everyone" prisoner exchange with Hamas, one of whose demands in launching the attack on Israel on October 9 was the release of all the Palestinian prisoners being held in Israeli jails.

Meirav Leshem-Gonen, father of a 21-year-old

hostage told the press the families had pleaded with Netanyahu not to launch military operations that could endanger their loved ones, a reference to the planned ground invasion. Malki Shemtov, the father of another hostage, said the families had insisted they were all in agreement that they don't care how many concessions the government had to make to get all captives back home safely.

Netanyahu cynically told the families that freeing the hostages was a chief goal of the war, a soporific that flatly contradicted his bloodthirsty "We will turn Gaza into an island of ruins" declaration. In all the government's pronouncements, the hostages have not so much as got a mention. It has taken three weeks for Netanyahu even to meet the families.

Yahya Sinwar, Hamas' leader in Gaza, issued a statement saying, "We are ready to conduct an immediate prisoner exchange deal that includes the release of all Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails in exchange for all prisoners held by the Palestinian resistance."

Amid the official howls of outrage against Hamas, according to B'tselem, as of last June, Israel was holding 4,499 Palestinians—mostly from the West Bank and East Jerusalem with 183 from the Gaza Strip, in detention or in prison on what it defined as "security" grounds. At that time, the Prison Service was also holding 850 Palestinians, 3 of them from the Gaza Strip, for being in Israel illegally.

Most significantly, the number of prisoners has doubled to more than 10,000 since October 9 after Israel arrested around 4,000 labourers from Gaza who had permits to work in Israel, detaining them in military bases in the Negev desert, with reports from Palestinian lawyers and officials of severe mistreatment, assaults and inhuman conditions, including being subjected to starvation and thirst. It has also arrested 1,070 other Palestinians in overnight army raids in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, most of whom are being held in administrative detention without charge.

Speaking at a press conference on Thursday in Ramallah, Qadura Fares, head of the Palestinian Authority's Commission for Detainees' Affairs, said recent developments are "unprecedented" and "dangerous." "Everyone who is arrested is assaulted. Many of the prisoners have had their limbs, hands and

legs broken... degrading and insulting expressions, insults, cursing, tying them with handcuffs to the back and tightening them at the end to the point of causing severe pain... naked, humiliating and group search of the prisoners," he explained.

On Wednesday, the Knesset, Israel's parliament, approved a plan reducing the minimum living space for each prisoner, previously 3.5 square metres, to accommodate the rising numbers and has made it easier to arrest Palestinians both in the occupied territories and in Israel itself on mere suspicion.



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