

Police attack anti-Netanyahu protesters as disillusionment with Gaza offensive grows

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Israeli police arrested 21 protesters, including two organisers, in Tel Aviv's Kaplan Square Saturday night. Thousands had taken to the streets in towns and cities across Israel against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, demanding early elections and a deal to release the remaining hostages held by Hamas in Gaza.

Police claimed the protest was an "illegal gathering" in Democracy Square, near the Israeli military's headquarters.

Far from dispersing the demonstration, police action brought more people out as news of the arrests spread on social media. Police then used water cannon in a bid to disperse the protesters, many carrying posters of their loved ones still held captive in Gaza and torches, without anti-government slogans, while mounted police attacked the crowds.

Among those drenched by the police was a hostage freed from Gaza, while an elderly man collapsed and had to be taken to hospital after being struck on the head by a mounted police officer with his reins. Several protesters were injured and required medical attention. The following day the police issued a statement saying the protesters had ignored officers' warnings, blocked roads, and clashed with police "despite repeated negotiation efforts."

In Jerusalem, there was a march of about 1,000 people to Paris Square. There were also demonstrations in the southern city of Beer Sheva, the northern port city of Haifa and Caesarea, outside Netanyahu's private residence. Speaking in Haifa, Yaakov Godu, father of one of the victims of the October 7 attack, said that Netanyahu "and his deranged messianic envoys are turning the families of the hostages into enemies."

It was the first time since the start of Israel's genocidal war ended nine-months of protests against

Netanyahu's plans to give his fascist government dictatorial powers that the police used water cannon in Kaplan Square. It was used more extensively than during those demonstrations.

The Zionist organisers of the anti-government demonstrations called off the weekly rallies in the wake of October 7 as the former generals, intelligence chiefs and politicians who had all served under Netanyahu at one time or another, called for wartime unity.

Former military chiefs of staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot joined Netanyahu's war cabinet in return for his suspending all non-emergency legislation, including the controversial judicial "reforms," while other leaders took prominent roles in the civilian relief effort. This was vital for Netanyahu as polls show that support for the government plummeted after October 7, with the overwhelming majority holding him personally responsible for the supposed military-intelligence failure that led to the attack on the southern kibbutzim and Supernova music festival.

Polls have still shown widespread support for the war, despite the global mass protests against Israel's genocidal war. Last week's survey by the Israel Democracy Institute indicated that the majority of Jewish Israelis oppose a detailed political agreement to end the war and two-thirds oppose humanitarian aid to Gaza. Nevertheless, opposition to Netanyahu is growing, with all the polls showing that his right-wing bloc would lose an election if held now. Netanyahu, on trial for corruption, is seeking to delay giving evidence when he is set to face embarrassing questions.

According to a poll by the Institute for National Security Studies, only a bare majority now think Israel can achieve all or most of its war aims, while a survey by the Israel Democracy Institute earlier this month found that only 39 percent think there is a high or very

high likelihood of the “absolute victory” promised by Netanyahu.

Dissent and discontent have fed into the weekly protests by Israelis, with some opposing the government’s refusal to prioritise the hostages’ release, many of whom are feared dead, and calling for a deal with Hamas to secure this, while an expanding and vocal anti-government opposition is calling for fresh elections to the Knesset.

There is as yet only a small group protesting against the war itself, supporting a ceasefire and opposing Israel’s occupation, although there are signs this is growing. Sofia Orr has served notice that she has refused to report for mandatory military service in protest against the war on Gaza. The 18-year-old is likely to become the first woman to be jailed for refusing military service. She has refused to give in despite facing threats on social media and being called a traitor.

Last December, Tal Mitnick became the first conscientious objector, when he refused his mandatory draft to join the IDF, for which he was sentenced to 30 days in custody, a sentence that has since been renewed twice.

That the police turned on the hostages’ families and attacked a peaceful protest that was not significantly larger than previous Saturday evening protests—and was not against the war per se—indicates that Netanyahu and his gang of fascists are determined to crack down on all dissent as the declared March 10 deadline for a ground offensive on Rafah approaches. Netanyahu is also determined to show he is in charge and fend off any challenge from his Zionist opponents.

In January, Tel Aviv police refused to allow an Arab-Jewish protest to take place in the city, claiming that it could lead to violence. It followed other bans on anti-war demonstrations in Israel’s predominantly Palestinian towns and cities. The police ban came after the High Court barred National Security Minister and Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben-Gvir, notorious for repeatedly pushing police to act aggressively against last year’s anti-government protesters, from giving police orders regarding their conduct during protests. Saturday’s events illustrate his determination to use the police in pursuit of his and the government’s broader political objective: Jewish Supremacy over the entire area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.

At the weekend, Netanyahu went on CBS News’ “Face the Nation” program to pledge an assault on Rafah, whether or not there is progress in negotiations with Gaza’s authorities. He said that Israel will only see a “total victory” once the IDF begins its invasion of Rafah, the last refuge of some 1.4 million Palestinians forced south from their homes in the north of the Strip. “If we have a deal, it will be delayed somewhat, but it will happen,” he said. “If we don’t have a deal, we’ll do it anyway.”

It was Gantz, Netanyahu’s rival and partner in war crimes, who first announced the March 10 deadline. For the war to take this deadly turn during Ramadan is a provocation which Netanyahu et al calculate is guaranteed to set the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem alight—providing the opportunity to open up a second front. Secure in the support of Washington and the major European powers, Netanyahu is positioning himself as Israel’s wartime strongman, above the law, and not answerable to anyone. He recently declared in a televised address that the war would continue regardless of the decisions the International Court of Justice reached on charges of genocide moved by South Africa. “No one will stop us—not The Hague, not the Axis of Evil and no one else. It is possible and necessary to continue until victory and we will do it.”

Netanyahu’s dictatorial course could not be successfully challenged under the leadership of his Zionist rivals before the war began. Now that it has, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives and unimaginable suffering for the Palestinians, Israeli workers and youth are also paying a price.



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