

Nearly 1 million Israelis demonstrate, calling for hostage deal and end to Gaza war

Jean Shaoul
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Nearly 500,000 people crowded into Hostages Square in Tel Aviv Sunday to demand the far-right government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu end the war in Gaza and secure a deal to bring home the hostages. Protests in Jerusalem, Haifa, Beersheba and other cities brought the total to more than one million.

The rallies were among the largest since the war began nearly two years ago, testifying to the depth of opposition to the war and the government.

Some of the former hostages spoke at the rally along with family members of those still held in Gaza. Yehuda Cohen, father of hostage Nimrod Cohen, said, "We're living under a terror organization that refuses to give us back our children for political reasons," referring to Netanyahu's government.

He added, "My son, Nimrod, is suffering so that the government can build settlements in Gaza, and I refuse to let him be sacrificed on that altar. This country won't return to normality until the hostages are returned in a comprehensive deal and the war ends. If the Netanyahu government isn't willing to do this, then they should quit and allow someone more responsible to do so."

In a video screened at the rally, several released hostages appealed to US President Donald Trump—the architect of Netanyahu's ethnic cleansing plan and Israel's main military backer—to end the war and bring the hostages home. Following the screening, Einav Zangauer, mother of one of the hostages, said, "We demand a comprehensive deal and an end to the war. We demand what we deserve—our children!"

The rally followed a day of protests in response to an appeal by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum and the October Council, two groups representing the hostages' families, for businesses, local authorities, universities, schools, tech companies, public transport

and workplaces to stop work. Activists blocked major roads and Tel Aviv's main Ayalon Highway, with some demonstrating outside ministers' homes and others marching to the nearby Likud party headquarters, where they lit a bonfire. The police fired water cannon and arrested at least 38 people.

The organisers had called for a National Day of Action after the cabinet's decision to expand ethnic cleansing in Gaza, rather than sign a deal to return the 50 remaining hostages. Only 20 of the hostages are thought to be alive and they are in a poor state of health.

Netanyahu's new offensive involves the forced displacement of around a million Palestinians living in Gaza City, most of whom have been displaced multiple times, and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) taking control of the city.

The political dead end of the protests is epitomised by the key role played by IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir, a former military aide to Netanyahu, who was widely trumpeted after he warned that the offensive could risk the lives of both hostages and soldiers.

His initial preference was to continue with the existing plan that is succeeding in the mass starvation of the Palestinians without requiring a larger military force. He nevertheless overcame his reservations and is now preparing a force of nearly 100,000 soldiers with air cover to forcibly displace the Palestinians toward southern Gaza as part of the operation to seize Gaza City. The army has already targeted the city's Al-Zaytoun neighbourhood with fighter jets, artillery, and explosive robots, systematically destroying hundreds of homes.

At the same time, this supposed Netanyahu oppositionist has been ordering near daily strikes on Lebanon in breach of the ceasefire. On Sunday, the

navy launched strikes against a power plant south of Sana'a, capital of Yemen, which is controlled by the Iranian-backed Houthis.

Zamir is only one war criminal among many who are striking a pose of opposition with blood on their hands as staunch defenders of the Gaza genocide. Earlier Sunday, a number of politicians visited Hostages Square to show “support”, including President Isaac Herzog, Opposition Leader Yair Lapid, Blue and White Party chair Benny Gantz—who rushed into government with Netanyahu in October 2023—and his former defence minister Yoav Gallant.

The October Council, which represents some family members of those held hostage in Gaza, or whose family members have been killed in the fighting, had called for a general strike. But at a meeting on Monday with the organisers, Arnon Bar-David, leader of the Zionist Histadrut trade union federation, refused the families’ pleas for him to call one.

He made it clear he feared that the mobilisation of workers on the issue of the war and hostages might coalesce with rising social, economic and above all political concerns into a broader-based opposition movement that the Histadrut would be unable to contain. A general “strike might shift public focus away from the hostages and toward political arguments”, he warned. Instead, he would “encourage” employers and unions to allow workers to attend protests and rallies without risking their employment rights.

Bar-David is well aware of the broader economic and political crisis, as anger mounts over the growing power of fascist, racist and religious groups, Netanyahu’s efforts to strengthen his powers and the corruption endemic in Netanyahu’s circle amid the potential for the war to expand in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iran.

Sunday’s protests show the depth of feeling against the war in Gaza, confirming the opinion polls that show the majority of Israelis want the war to end. But opposition primarily centred on concerns for the hostages, which complains of a “just war becoming an unnecessary war” and which is often indifferent to the suffering of the Palestinians, remains trapped within a Zionist perspective.

No progressive struggle can be taken up against the Israeli government without opposing the genocide

which has so far claimed at least 61,000 Palestinian lives and threatens the remaining 2.1 million with starvation. It means rejecting the ethno-religious exclusion that forms the basis of the Israeli state.

The issues raised by the mass protest movement against Netanyahu’s judicial coup that swept the country for months in 2023 are raised again, but at a much higher level. Then as now the protesters wrapped themselves in the Israeli flag in support of the Zionist project and refused to take up the question on the democratic rights of the oppressed Palestinian people.

In October 2023, they called off the protests. Their leaders issued a joint statement expressing full backing for the IDF and unity with the government, saying “In times like these, there is no opposition and coalition in Israel”. Five joined the war cabinet: Gantz, Gadi Eisenkot, Gideon Sa’ar, Hili Tropper, and Yifat Shasha-Biton. As for the protesters, many forgot their promises to refuse reservist duty and went off to war.

While today there are groups raising the question of the Palestinians, their numbers are as yet small. They must take up the difficult but vital task of breaking with Zionism and unifying the Israeli working class with the Palestinians and workers throughout the region in a united struggle. The aim must be: not a mini-Palestinian state alongside Israel, but the overthrow and replacement of the Zionist state and the various Arab bourgeois regimes that support it with the establishment of the United Socialist States of the Middle East.

This is the perspective of permanent revolution fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International. Sections of the ICFI must be built in Israel and across the Middle East to provide the leadership necessary to conduct this struggle.



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