

Israeli conductor Ilan Volkov arrested in protest at Gaza border

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Israeli conductor Ilan Volkov was one of four activists arrested at the Gaza border last Friday, just one week after his powerful statement at the BBC Proms opposing the Gaza genocide. He was filmed being taken away by police, saying “We need to stop the genocide now. It’s ruining everyone’s lives. Stop it.”

Volkov and the others were released around an hour later. They returned to the protest, which was able to reach the border and stage a demonstration. The action was called in solidarity with the global Sumud aid flotilla, which aims to break the blockade and siege of Gaza.

Military forces prevented the protesters from crossing into Gaza, but they were able to reach the fence. They demonstrated for about half an hour, defying military intimidation that saw soldiers ripping up their placards.

Estimates vary of the numbers involved, but between 100 and 200 protesters marched towards the Gaza border fence. They carried placards in English and Hebrew, with slogans such as “Stop Zionist Terrorism” and “Stop the Ongoing Nakba.” Demonstrators chanted, “Stop the destruction, stop the starvation, there’s a holocaust in Gaza.”

Calling for an end to the genocide, they demanded the disarmament of Israel and for a boycott to achieve this. They called on conscripts to refuse compulsory military service and chanted, “In the office, in the field, every soldier is complicit in murder.”

The night before his arrest, Volkov had participated in a musical protest in Tel Aviv’s Bima Square. Flautist and film composer Dalit Ziv assembled several musicians to simulate the sound of the drones that “circle... Gaza day and night,” as she wrote on Facebook. Drone, she explained, is “also a musical term for a long, steady sound.”

International and domestic attention has been drawn

to such protests by Volkov’s public stance at the Proms. As he explained afterwards, he chose the Proms to make his public statement because of its international high profile. He had been intending to use this platform for months, he said, which points to a rising political anger within Israel itself.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1976, Volkov still lives in nearby Herzliya. His father was a pianist from Kharkiv, his mother an academic whose parents escaped Germany before World War II.

He has a huge international reputation and is closely associated with orchestras like the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. After studying at Jerusalem’s Rubin Academy, he continued his training at the Royal Academy of Music in London, which made him exempt from Israeli conscription.

An artist with a particular affinity for music of the first two decades of the twentieth century, he has curated new music events in Israel and established a performance venue alongside jazz musician Assif Tsahar. This work with local artists has made more effective his recent announcement that he will not work in Israel for the foreseeable future.

Volkov has taken his stance in defiance of a Zionist intimidation and slander. Going through his Facebook page following the Proms speech, he described as the “Highlight of the week!” a post telling him to “Go kibinimat” [go fuck yourself].

Volkov has also won support from within Israel, speaking to the growing unease at the trajectory of the far-right Netanyahu government. This is mostly confined to appeals to a potentially liberal wing of the Israeli government, under conditions where those forces are fully complicit in the mass murder and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. Some comments have called for “de-Zionisation,” pointing to the need for a

wider political programme.

Volkov has written that the aim of the Israeli massacre in Gaza is “the continuation of destruction.” He has identified the absence of any democracy or truthful media reporting as the Netanyahu government steps up its efforts to prevent any scrutiny of its actions.

A few days before Volkov’s arrest, two MPs from Britain’s ruling Labour Party were barred entry to the occupied West Bank on grounds of “public security or public safety or public order considerations.” Simon Opher and Peter Prinsley, both doctors, were part of a delegation organised by the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding (CAABU), a parliamentary humanitarian NGO. The delegation had gone to study “the grave challenges facing medical facilities in the region.”

Previous ministerial delegations from CAABU have also been refused access. In April, two other Labour MPs, Yuan Yang and Abtisam Mohamed, were deported from Israel after being detained and interrogated—the first time British MPs have been banned from the country.

The then UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy responded with a lame statement, saying it was “unacceptable, counterproductive, and deeply concerning.” The Israeli government responded that the MPs had “accused Israel of false claims” in the House of Commons and were “actively involved in promoting sanctions against Israeli ministers”. This references Mohamed’s cross-party letter, signed by 61 MPs, calling for a ban on Israeli settlement goods.

This time Opher was explicit that they did not want to mount any challenge to Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank: “We weren’t in any way trying to undermine the Israelis, just trying to see what we could do in the West Bank” around healthcare conditions.

Prinsley’s op-ed in *The Guardian* was even more revealing. He admitted that it was not the first time British MPs had been barred access. “I don’t defend their removal from Israel for a moment,” he complained, “but my removal is different.”

What is different is that Prinsley is Jewish, and a member of the Zionist Board of Deputies of British Jews (BoD).

The BoD suspended five deputies this year for signing an open letter that said “Israel’s soul is being

ripped out” by its actions in Gaza. One of the suspended deputies, Rebecca Singerman-Knight, described herself as “a proud Zionist,” saying it was “precisely because of my Zionism that I speak out against the extreme elements within the current governing coalition.”

Prinsley took a similar tack. “What has become of the state of Israel?” he asked, warning that it “has isolated itself.” His statement claims that the Zionist state was founded in 1948 on “inclusive, pluralistic, open and democratic principles.”

“Israel once represented hope for a generation of Jews,” he wrote, but “the friendships that we in the Jewish community once thought eternal are now being undermined by the present Israeli government.”

Prinsley’s own government has the blood of the Palestinians on its hands, after supporting genocide for the past two years. If Keir Starmer’s Labour Party and its MPs are anxious now, it is because they want to take their distance from an historic crime that is plumbing new depths of depravity.

The arrest of Volkov and the actions taken against MPs representing an Israeli ally shows that no humanitarian protest will call a halt to genocide, only a political and industrial struggle by the working class to bring down Starmer and Netanyahu.



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