

Netanyahu government brutally represses opposition to wars against Iran and Lebanon

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Police have cracked down aggressively on Israel's small anti-Netanyahu government protests against the illegal US-Israeli war on Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the ongoing repression in Gaza and the West Bank and the imposition of the death penalty for Palestinians charged with terrorism.

The police have said the right to protest "is not absolute" and must be balanced with the "right to public order". The army has limited gatherings in public areas to 150 people and refused protests in Tel Aviv, citing Iranian missile threats.

These authoritarian measures are the domestic requirement for pursuing a Greater Israel policy, as part of US imperialism's broader political and military agenda to reorganise and control the resource-rich Middle East in preparation for wider wars against China and Russia. What are now often referred to as Israel's own "forever wars" demand the suspension of the democratic right to oppose and protest.

Nevertheless, protests and rallies have continued around the country. Last weekend saw the sixth consecutive week of protests by groups opposed to the Iran war, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption—his long-running trial has been delayed yet again for "security and political" reasons—and his fascist government's bid to overhaul the judiciary and exempt ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students from military service.

It followed a High Court ruling that ordered the police to find a framework balancing "security needs and freedom of speech." The court order followed a petition by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) demanding an end to the de facto ban on political demonstrations during wartime, after police forcefully dispersed several anti-government protests. The court emphasized that even if protests exceeded the permitted number, that did not necessarily give police grounds to disperse the demonstrations.

ACRI had filed the petition on behalf of Itamar Greenberg, one of the protesters arrested at a demonstration on 28 March. The 20-year-old student had served 197 days in

prison as a conscientious objector to conscription, one of the longest sentences ever imposed. He had previously been arrested at a protest in May last year, when he was subjected to an unlawful strip-search.

Hundreds of police and militarized Border Police had faced off protesters in Tel Aviv's Habima Square. No sooner had anti-war chants started than the police began throwing protesters to the ground and arresting people, including Greenberg. The police declared that the demonstration was "prohibited under emergency regulations" and that officers had acted in response to a "real risk to human life" due to the potential for missile sirens. This was an obvious fabrication as Habima Square sits atop one of Tel Aviv's largest public bomb shelters.

Last Saturday, several thousand people took part in an anti-war and anti-government rally in Tel Aviv's Habima Square, with estimates of the numbers varying from 2,000 to 10,000. While the numbers exceeded a 1,000-person court-ordered limit, police did not intervene as they have in previous weeks. Several hundred others gathered in dozens of locations across the country, including Jerusalem, Haifa, Beer Sheva, Kfar Saba, Tamra and Kfar Yassif.

Netanyahu's government is seeking to introduce two new bills to increase its powers before the elections to be held later this year.

Communication Minister Shlomo Karhi is to introduce a communications bill that will give the government political control of a new regulatory agency to replace the two existing agencies. It will end the separation between the commercial television channels and their news departments, expanding commercial influence over news broadcasts; remove restrictions on cross-ownership of media outlets; lift the ban on advertising on multichannel platforms; and government control over measuring and publishing television ratings.

Secondly, the government is seeking to split the attorney general's role into three: the government's legal adviser, the head of the prosecution and the state's representative in court. Gali Baharav-Miara, the Attorney General, has

repeatedly clashed with the government, most recently arguing that Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right National Security Minister, who is in charge of the police, is exceeding his powers, including intensifying enforcement against protesters demonstrating against the government. She has called for his dismissal.

The prime minister and justice minister would nominate the legal adviser, who would be appointed by the cabinet. The justice minister would appoint the head of the prosecution service, approval from the Constitution Committee, and appoint the state's representative in court. Crucially, the attorney general's opinion will no longer be binding on the government, while the bill will allow the government to choose another lawyer to represent it if the state's representative in court disagrees with the government.

Powers giving the government control over the media and judiciary come as some of the enormous costs of the war on Iran and Hezbollah are beginning to emerge.

During the 40-day war, Iran fired around 1,000 missiles at Israel, causing damage at hundreds of locations, including 16 that hit populated areas and killed 14 people. A total of 24 people have died in Israel and the occupied West Bank, where there are no public bomb shelters, and more than 7,000 have been wounded. Two others were killed by missiles fired from Lebanon, while one Israeli civilian was killed by errant fire by the Israeli army near the Lebanese border. At least 2,055 people have been killed and 6,588 others injured in Lebanon since the start of Israel's latest offensive in Lebanon on 2 March.

The Finance Ministry said that defence and military spending for the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), Defence Ministry, National Security Ministry and other security organizations had cost \$7 billion, while the government's compensation plans for direct missile damage, loss of economic output for businesses and unpaid leave for employees thus far is estimated at around \$4 billion. As of the end of March, the Israel Tax Authority had received around 23,000 claims for property damage due to the war.

A further \$1 billion is being spent on civilian costs, including hospital operations, emergency response and expenses for the Social Affairs Ministry. This totals more than \$11 billion, with the Finance Ministry admitting that the full costs to both Israel's economy and the government's budget will only become fully clear in the future.

The war has already cost the amount allocated in the state budget—just under \$13 billion, including a \$2.3 billion reserve—for defence costs related to the war, including \$7 billion designated as a reserve, as well as nearly \$2 billion to cover primarily civilian war-related expenses, such as

rebuilding damaged infrastructure and buildings. Moreover, these projections assumed the war would end in mid-April. However, the Ministry of Defence says that the Iran campaign alone has cost \$13 billion and is seeking further funds for operations in Lebanon and reconstruction, estimated at more than \$2 billion. It is expected to ask for an additional \$9 billion.

None of this takes into account the cost of the partial shutdown of the Israeli economy, which amounts to tens of billions of dollars, as public services, including schools, and businesses are forced to close and hundreds of thousands of reservists are required to serve for longer periods in the IDF, now fighting against Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, despite a supposed ceasefire, and mounting widescale operations against the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

At the end of March, the Bank of Israel and Finance Ministry estimated that if the cease-fire were to hold, GDP in 2026 will drop by roughly 1.4 percent, as growth forecasts fall from 5.2 percent to 3.8 percent for the year, translating into a GDP loss of approximately \$10-12 billion compared with the original plan. This assumed that there will be no further major fighting this year or in 2027 although defence spending would still need to increase to prepare for the possibility of another round of hostilities.

It also does not take into account the IDF's plans for a "broad security zone"—an occupation force—in Lebanon that will require a larger reserve force than originally planned and prevent Israel's northern towns from returning to normalcy, affecting both the education system and the business and tourism sectors.

The state budget for 2026, passed last month, funded defence and the coalition's support base, the settlers and the ultra-Orthodox—at the expense of health, education, social welfare and transportation services as VAT and public transportation rose. Around 2 million Israelis (21 percent of the population), including 880,000 children (28 percent), already live below the poverty line—placing Israel second highest in the OECD.



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