

Risking arrest and assault, Israelis begin protesting Gaza war

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Gathering outside the army's headquarters in central Tel Aviv, dozens of Israelis called for a ceasefire and the release of all hostages.

Last Saturday evening, for the first time since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel and the start of Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip, a few dozen Israelis gathered in Tel Aviv to call for a ceasefire. In the current atmosphere of violence, repression, and [persecution](#), any public act of defiance against the war is noteworthy.

The protesters gathered in front of the Israeli military headquarters on Kaplan Street, where, until the war began, tens of thousands of anti-government protesters had been amassing every Saturday night since January. A few hundred meters away, the families of those who were [abducted to Gaza](#) held a separate protest following a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; at the meeting and the subsequent demonstration, they demanded that Israel pursue the release of all the hostages in Gaza in exchange for the release of all Palestinians held on security charges in Israeli prisons — a deal being labeled "[all for all](#)" — which Hamas has [intimated](#) to be the group's terms for any major agreement.

During each of Israel's previous assaults on Gaza, internal dissent has carried a significant price, with protesters often facing arrests and beatings by police. And repression comes not only from the state: in 2014, when Israel last invaded Gaza with ground troops, hundreds of activists from the fascist group La Familia [attacked](#) an anti-war demonstration in Tel Aviv, while police stood by.

This time, the police announced a [total prohibition](#) on "political demonstrations" while Israel is at war. Kobi Shabtai, Israel's police chief, even [threatened](#) to send to Gaza any Palestinian citizen of Israel who expresses solidarity with Palestinians in the strip. On Oct. 18, five protesters were arrested in Haifa even before a "solidarity vigil" for Gaza began, while 12 were [arrested](#) during a similar event in the northern Arab city of Umm Al-Fahm. And at the same time as demonstrators gathered on Kaplan Street, hundreds of right wingers tried to [break into the student dormitories](#) at Netanya Academic College, near Tel Aviv, chanting, "Death to Arabs" and demanding that Arab students be expelled from the city.

Several of those who participated in the Tel Aviv protest on Saturday told +972 that they wanted to go out to the streets earlier — as soon as it became clear, in their words, that the massacre committed by Hamas on Oct. 7 was being used to justify Israeli war crimes in Gaza — but they feared for their lives due to the public atmosphere. Since the beginning of the war, left-wing activists have been receiving death threats and are being doxxed in right-wing social media groups, with their home addresses and other personal details made public. Some of them, like the prominent journalist Israel Frey, have been forced to flee their homes and [go into hiding](#).

Parallel to the ban on protests, the police have arrested over 170 Palestinian citizens of Israel since the beginning of the fighting on suspicion of “inciting violence” and “supporting terrorism” online. In some cases, the accusation was based on no more than posting verses from the Quran or “liking” posts on social media expressing solidarity with civilians in Gaza. Indictments were filed against 24 of them, including the actress [Maisa Abd Elhadi](#), who is also facing the possibility of having her [citizenship revoked](#).

Nonetheless, the protest on Saturday, which lasted for about an hour and a half, went ahead unhindered, possibly because it was held near the area where the families of the kidnapped have been protesting for more than two weeks. Demonstrators held signs bearing slogans in English, Hebrew, and Arabic including, “Israelis for a ceasefire,” “An eye for an eye until we all go blind,” and, “If you condemn one war crime, you must condemn them all.” There were no speeches, and the only chant was “Ceasefire now.”

“I came to protest because we cannot ignore the horrors that happened here on Saturday [during Hamas’ attack] and the horrors that are still happening in Gaza,” said 21-year-old Leah Cohen Shpiegel. “I am here to demand a ceasefire, a political resolution, and the release of the captives. The cycle of bloodshed and endless wars must come to an end. There is no victory in this war.”

Some of those who had participated in the hostage families’ protest also joined the anti-war demonstration. At one point, Yair Golan, a general in the army’s reserves and a former member of Knesset for the liberal Meretz party, attempted to speak, but he was silenced after saying that the war in Gaza would continue for many years.

Yaacov Godo, an anti-occupation activist whose son was killed on Oct. 7, told +972 that he intends to go to the Knesset with a placard saying that his son’s blood is on Netanyahu’s hands. In a post on social media announcing his plan, thousands pledged to join him.

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