

Protests in Israel and worldwide against war on Lebanon

By Mike Head
24 July 2006

Protests were held in Israel, across the Middle East and around the world over the past few days condemning Israel's US-backed war on Lebanon. In Arab countries, rallies again denounced the acquiescence of the Arab states in the onslaught. Elsewhere, the largest demonstrations, involving thousands of people, were held in the United States and in countries closely allied with Washington's war aims in the region—Britain, Australia and Canada.

In Israel itself, some 2,500 people on Saturday attended a demonstration, marching from Tel Aviv's Rabin Square to a rally at the Cinemateque plaza. It was the second substantial protest in a week. But unlike previous antiwar protests in Israel, Arab organisations—among them Hadash and Balad—participated in the event in large numbers.

Among the protesters were people who had experienced counterattacks from Hezbollah rockets, but blamed the Israeli government. Tehiya Regev of Carmiel, whose two neighbours were killed in a Katyusha attack, told the *Haaretz* newspaper. "This war is not headed in the right direction. The captured soldiers have long since been forgotten, so I came to call for an immediate stop to this foolish and cruel war."

The rally also had an anti-Washington theme, unlike previous antiwar demonstrations in Israel. In addition to the calls for the Israeli prime minister and defence minister to resign, there were slogans condemning US President George W. Bush. Alongside chants of, "We will not kill, we will not die in the name of Zionism," were chants of, "We will not die and will not kill in the service of the United States."

Demonstrators chanted: "[Israeli Prime Minister Ehud] Olmert and Bush have struck a deal, to carry on with the occupation." Others called on Israeli soldiers to refuse to do their duty.

Several antiwar protests took place in other parts of Israel. In the northern port city of Haifa, which has suffered dozens of missile strikes, around 50 demonstrators held a roadside protest on the corner of Lebanon Gate Street, under the watchful eye of the border police.

The protesters, some of them teenagers, waved placards and shouted slogans such as "Unconditional ceasefire now" and "Get out of Lebanon," as some passing motorists honked their horns in rebuke and yelled abuse out their windows.

Many leaders of Israel's traditional peace movement, such as the anti-settlement group Peace Now, opposed the rallies, some labelling them as "fringe." But a protest spokesman noted that in the Lebanon invasion of 1982 it took more than 10 days of warfare to bring out this many protesters, marking the first crack in the official pro-war "consensus." Many thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Arab countries on Thursday and Friday. Clashes broke out in Cairo between police and protesters who had gathered after Friday prayers at the Al-Azhar Mosque. Thousands of demonstrators shouted anti-Israeli slogans and denounced the recognition of Israel by Arab governments. Some police officers and demonstrators were wounded in confrontations with police.

In Jordan, some 2,000 people marched through Amman in support of Lebanon and the Palestinians after prayers, heeding a call by Islamists and union leaders. Hundreds of Syrians also took to the streets to denounce the attacks.

Hundreds of Iraqi Shiites rallied after imams led weekly prayers with condemnations of Israel, the US and many Arab governments. They included some 300 members of Moqtada al-Sadr's movement who marched in the Baghdad neighborhood of Sadr City.

On Thursday, more than 100,000 people in Yemen turned out for a rally in support of the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples in the face of the Israeli blitz.

Demonstrations have been held in numerous US and Canadian cities over the past several days. One of the largest was in Dearborn, a largely Arab-American suburb of Detroit. Carrying banners saying "Stop Israeli Terrorism" and chanting antiwar slogans, some 10,000 people rallied to demand that the US government put pressure on Israel to halt attacks in Lebanon.

Marchers carried signs saying "Down, down Israel" and chanted, "One, two, three, four. Stop the bombing. Stop the war." Saying that Israel was killing children and bombing innocent citizens, one of the speakers, Osama Siblani of the Congress of Arab-American Organizations, said: "This is terror." The crowd cheered loudly in response: "They are cowards."

Several hundred demonstrators gathered in downtown Chicago on Saturday, carrying banners that read: "The Right to

Fight Or The Might to Smite,” or “Not with our money, not in our name.” Dale Lehman, a 60-year-old Jewish resident of Chicago, said: “I’m outraged as an American, I’m outraged as a human being at what is happening to the people of Lebanon.”

In San Francisco on July 13, “Chants of “Free, free Palestine” and “Bush/Olmert you can’t hide, We charge you with Genocide,” filled the street in front of the Israeli Consulate. About 700 demonstrators demanded an end to the bombing of Gaza and Lebanon.

Four days later, on July 17, Jewish peace groups in the Bay Area held a demonstration during the lunch hour in front of the Israeli consulate. Following a short rally, 18 Jewish protesters were arrested in a civil disobedience action. The protesters were herded into police vans, driven to the main jail, cited and released.

In New York, as many as 1,500 people rallied in front of the Israeli Mission to the United Nations in New York on July 18. The crowd, which included many young Arabs and children, chanted, ‘Free, free Palestine! Free, free Lebanon!’”

Across Canada, protests were held in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Ottawa over the weekend. In Toronto, the participants marched from the Israeli consulate to the US consulate, demanding an immediate ceasefire.

Throughout Britain, tens of thousands of people joined weekend demonstrations in London, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Kirkcaldy, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has rejected criticism of Israel’s bombardment of Lebanon and refused demands that he make any call on Washington and Tel Aviv to implement a ceasefire.

The protests were organised by the Stop the War Coalition, the Muslim Association of Britain, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and several Lebanese organisations to denounce Israel’s “crimes against humanity.” The demonstrations were held in several towns and cities, including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Manchester and London.

The largest protest was held in London, where an estimated 20,000 participated in a demonstration through the capital, including a march past the US Embassy. People of all nationalities and denominations took part, including a large contingent of Lebanese and Palestinian youth.

A heavy police presence guarded the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square. Some 50 police officers and metal barricades prevented the demonstrators gaining any access to the main entrance, as protesters shouted slogans such as, “George Bush, terrorist” and “Down, down, USA.”

Speakers at the main rally included George Galloway from the Respect-Unity Coalition, Yasmin Atallah of the British Muslim Initiative, and a representative from the Jewish Socialists. Betty Hunter, general secretary of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, said, “The main purpose of this demonstration is to say to Tony Blair and our government that

we are ashamed of the position they are taking which is basically to collude with the war crimes of Israel.... We are here to demand that the British government changes its policy.”

Some 2,000 people joined a demonstration outside the BBC headquarters in Manchester to protest the BBC’s pro-Israel coverage of the war in the Lebanon.

In Spain, tens of thousands of people took part in Middle East peace marches through the streets of a number of cities, including Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza, Murcia, and Valladolid. Several rallies denounced Israel’s “disproportionate” use of military force. Protesters carried Lebanese and Palestinian flags, and banners with slogans such as “Israel out of Lebanon,” “Against war and occupation. Peace in the Middle East,” while chanting slogans like “Israel murderer,” or “Zionist=Terrorist.”

In Stockholm, where 2,000 marched to the Israeli embassy, several hundred protesters clashed with police. Two people were arrested.

Other demonstrations took place in Geneva, Paris, Strasbourg, Warsaw, Vienna, Moscow and Amsterdam. In Geneva, 500 people marched in silence behind a coffin meant to symbolise the death of the conscience of the United Nations.

Several protests were held in South Asia—in Indian Kashmir, cities across Pakistan and the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka. Hundreds of demonstrators in Malaysia burned Israeli flags. Thousands marched in Indonesia, accusing Israel of atrocities against civilians. In Makassar, capital of South Sulawesi province, about 3,000 people marched to the provincial parliament in protest, the state Antara news agency said.

A peaceful march by about 300 people in Auckland, New Zealand on Saturday ended in a confrontation with police, who attempted to arrest a protester who pulled down the US consulate’s flag. After being defended by the crowd, a man was later arrested and charged with trying to escape lawful custody and “disorderly behaviour likely to cause violence.”

Significant demonstrations were held in a number of Australian cities.

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