

Hundreds of Israelis rally in Tel Aviv against shootings of Gaza protesters



Israelis rally outside the Tel Aviv headquarters of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party against the IDF's use of lethal force against protesters in Gaza **i24NEWS**

Reaction to the deaths of 16 protesters in clashes on Gaza border split across Israel's political spectrum

Hundreds of Israelis rallied in front of the Tel Aviv headquarters of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling Likud party on Sunday against the military's use of lethal force against tens of thousands of Palestinian protesters who marched on the Gaza border over the weekend.

Held under the banner "Create hope, stop the next war", some 250 protesters marched with placards calling on Israel to "stop the shooting" sponsored by the left-wing Meretz party and watchdog Peace Now.

Protesters chanted "no to the occupation" and "in Gaza and Sderot, little girls want to stay alive" while a small counter-protest formed on the opposite side of the street.

"The government is doing everything it can to present the Palestinians as the only guilty party whereas it played an important part in the responsibility for what happened," Hagit Ofan of the Peace Now group which opposes Israeli settlement of Palestinian land told *AFP*.

Peace Now issued a statement condemning what it called the army's "trigger happy" policies under orders from the government.

Sixteen Palestinians were killed by IDF fire on Friday, as tens of thousands of demonstrators surged towards the border. Of the 16 killed, 10 were members of Palestinian terror groups, including five members of the Islamist Hamas group which rules the blockaded enclave, the Israeli army said.

Reaction to the military's response to the clashes on Friday was split across Israel's political spectrum with most factions — including opposition parties — expressing support for the military while the left-wing Meretz and Joint (Arab) List parties condemned the military's use of lethal force and demanded an investigation into the army's response.



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Prime Minister and Likud head Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday praised troops for "guarding the country's borders".

"Well done to our soldiers," he wrote in a statement. "Israel acts vigorously and with determination to protect its sovereignty and the security of its citizens."

Avi Gabbay of the opposition's Zionist Union said he had "no doubt our soldiers did everything to reduce the number of casualties", while Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid said he was "proud" of Israel's soldiers.

A statement from the Joint (Arab) List, by contrast, said that "the fire against the protesters again proves that Israel chooses a path of force and deliberate

violence.”

“All nations that have been under occupation fought against their occupiers, and the Palestinian nation is like any other nation,” a statement from the party said.

The newly-elected head of Israel’s left-wing Meretz party, Tamar Zandberg, meanwhile demanded an investigation into the killing of 16 protesters in Gaza.

“It’s Israel’s duty to know what happened there, and it’s also in its interest to prevent another round of violence. We must not allow a ‘trigger-happy’ policy to lead to the loss of innocent lives,” Zandberg said in a tweet on Saturday, calling for “an independent investigation by Israel, including a probe into the rules of engagement and the military and political readiness for the events.”



*Israeli soldiers hold rifles in southern Israel near mass demonstrations in Gaza on March 30 2018. **IDF Spokesperson’s Unit***

Zandberg’s position drew fierce criticism from hawkish defense minister Avigdor Liberman, chair of the secular right-wing nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, who charged that Meretz has long represented “Palestinian interest” in Israel’s parliament.

“Any state whose borders people tried to crash would act in an even more severe way than we did, and therefore the procession of hypocrites calling for a committee of inquiry must understand that there will be no such thing,” Liberman said. “There will not be any international inquiry. We will not cooperate with any inquiry of this kind.”

The army said 30,000 Palestinians took part in Friday’s planned rallies endorsed by all Palestinian factions to mark ‘Land Day’, which commemorates the killing of six unarmed Arab protesters in Israel in 1976.

Calling it the ‘Great March of Return,’ protesters were demanding hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who fled or were expelled during the war surrounding Israel’s creation in 1948 be allowed to return.

Israel, meanwhile, accused Gaza militant groups of using the protests as a cover to either break through the border or launch terror attacks.

Gaza’s health ministry said that in addition to the 16 Palestinians killed, more than 1,400 were wounded Friday, 758 of them by live fire, with the remainder hurt by rubber bullets and tear gas inhalation.

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) on Sunday disputed the Hamas-run ministry’s claim, however, asserting that only “dozens” of Palestinians were hit by live bullets.

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