

Tel Aviv Protests: While Arabs and Jews Unite, Fake News Divides

by [Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](#)

Neri Zilber, a journalist and analyst on Middle East politics and culture, is an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On the night of August 11, tens of thousands of Arab-Israelis and Jewish-Israelis marched from Rabin Square to the plaza of the Tel Aviv Museum in central Tel Aviv, protesting the recently passed Nation State Law. The demonstrators held up placards demanding equality, justice, a repeal of the law, and an end to what a few termed apartheid. Some chanted (in Arabic) “The people demand the fall of the law.” Others chanted (in Hebrew) “Bibi go home,” referring to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Most controversially, some in the crowd hoisted aloft the red, black, white and green Palestinian flag; others, for their part, hosted aloft the blue and white Israeli flag with the Star of David.

As an expression of Arab-Jewish solidarity inside Israel, the event was a major success—perhaps even historic.

While the police curiously refused to provide an estimate of protesters present, as is customary for such rallies, the numbers who took the streets were undeniably significant. A conservative assessment given to me by a leader of the 2011 “social justice” movement and veteran of such mass mobilizations was 50,000 people. Considering the number of people who streamed along Shaul Hamelech Boulevard, the real count could have easily been twice that, potentially rivaling a similar demonstration in Tel Aviv organized by the Druze community the week prior, also in protest of the Nation State Law.

Most significantly, the police presence in and around the event was minimal bordering on non-existent: senior police chiefs monitored the march at its head with a few lightly armed Border Policemen dispersed throughout, but there were no riot control forces or mounted police in sight. The entire rally proceeded, and concluded, peacefully and respectfully—a sharp contrast to other violence-plagued demonstrations I have personally witnessed in Israel, whether by left-wing activists, anarchists, ultra-Orthodox, settlers, or indeed Arabs themselves. This, despite the fact that the march ended with speeches outside the Tel Aviv Museum, which sits directly opposite the headquarters of the Israel Defense Forces (the “Kirya”), not the Arab public’s most favored institution.

In this way, tens of thousands of Israeli citizens, from elderly Arabs in wheelchairs to infant Jewish babies, Bedouins in traditional dishdasha robes and Tel Aviv hipsters with beers, marched together as part of what one speaker called

the “Equality Camp,” drawing on the specter of Israel’s old “Peace Camp” while distinguishing it as a new movement. And yet, there were those Palestinian flags in the mix, as well as scattered nationalist chants of “with our souls and blood we’ll redeem you, O Palestine.” Within minutes of the rally’s end, these are the images Netanyahu and other government officials immediately seized upon in an attempt to condemn the entire gathering. The premier went so far as to post a [short video clip \(https://www.facebook.com/Netanyahu/videos/10155772860682076/\)](https://www.facebook.com/Netanyahu/videos/10155772860682076/) on social media of protesters waving the Palestinian flag, declaring that “there was no better testament to the need for the Nation State Law.”

Opposition politicians, including Labor Party chairman Avi Gabai and Yesh Atid head Yair Lapid, also joined in the denunciations. Lapid wondered on Twitter, “What would happen to someone who tried to march through the center of Ramallah with Israeli flags”— as if this was in any way an apt parallel. Calling the display of Palestinian flags “a big mistake,” former premier Ehud Barak summed up the feelings of those Israelis otherwise critical of the Netanyahu government: “This [protest] is a free service for those behind the law.”

Worse still, the local media, almost non-existent at the event, joined in the chorus. Front pages and prime time news shows screamed “PALESTINIAN FLAGS IN THE HEART OF TEL AVIV,” with coverage apparently limited to those same short video clips highlighted by Netanyahu. One would never have known that there were also Israeli flags present; that the Palestinian flags at most numbered perhaps a hundred or two (in a crowd of tens of thousands); and that the pro-Palestinian chants came from an extremely small grouping who were overwhelmed by the vast majority demanding things like equality and an end to racism.

One would also not have known, simply following the public discussion, that the organizers of the event—the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee—had requested the public not display any national flags whatsoever. Committee head Mohammed Barakeh confirmed this to me backstage during the protest, adding lamentably, “but I can’t control what people do.”

“You’re causing us damage,” one Arab organizer [excoriated \(https://mobile.twitter.com/eran_singer/status/1028486997814505472/video/1\)](https://mobile.twitter.com/eran_singer/status/1028486997814505472/video/1) other participants at the start of the rally. “Two weeks I’ve been hard at work on this demonstration, so that they come from the entirety of the Israeli population....We agreed that there would be no flags.” The video clip of this exchange—almost unprecedented in Arab-Israeli society—received almost no coverage.

The speakers chosen reinforced this communal approach. Aymen Odeh, head of the Joint (Arab) List party, told me to my surprise that “no politicians would be speaking, and it’s better that way.” In their stead, a handful of orators, in both Arabic and Hebrew, emphasized that the target of the protest was the Nation-State Law. “I want to speak to our Jewish cousins,” Barakeh said in Hebrew to the crowd. “If we don’t unite soon [the law] will come hurt you too.” Amos Shoken, the publisher of the left-wing Haaretz daily, also spoke, saying: “I’m sure there are lots of disagreements between people here about many issues...but we’re all against this divisive government...we have to unite.”

Standing among the masses of Arabs and Jews exercising their right to free speech under the umbrella of Israel’s democracy, this long-sought unity of the Israeli Left didn’t seem like such an impossible dream. But then came the condemnations from the politicians (including from the center-left), the selective social media clips, and the skewed media coverage. The old divisions resurfaced, with the Jewish-Israeli public seeing the rally not as a platform for common action amidst a common cause (the repeal of the Nation-State Law, the toppling of the current government), but rather further proof of Arab-Israeli disloyalty. All the uplift and hope undone by a few flags and chants that didn’t represent the vast majority of those who chose to spend their Saturday night peacefully marching in the streets.

At the same time as the demonstration, next door to the Tel Aviv Museum, a Beatles tribute concert took place

outside the Opera House. While the protesters filed by chanting, the strains of a long-ago hit were still audible: “All you need is love, love. Love is all you need...”

In Israel, apparently, it’ll take a lot more than that to effect real change. ❖

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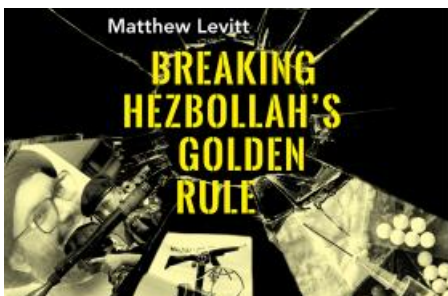
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