

# [***Israel rocked by largest protests since war began as Netanyahu faces growing pressure***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BP7-YCN1-JBSS-S01V-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Jerusalem (CNN) &#8212; Thousands of people took to the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem over the weekend in the largest protests Israel has seen since the start [*of the war against Hamas,*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-01-24/index.html) a significant challenge to the increasingly embattled leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Demonstrators are angry at Netanyahu and his government for not having secured the release of all the hostages taken captive during the October 7 terror attack. While 105 people were released during a temporary truce [*last year,*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/12/world/hostage-israel-hamas-deal-dg/) another 130 that were kidnapped [*are either dead or still being held by Hamas and other militant groups.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/15/middleeast/hamas-interview-diamond-hostages-ceasefire-intl/index.html)

Banners at the protests called on the Prime Minister to resign and for Israel to hold new elections.

"You've failed," one poster read. "Impeachment now," read another.

Netanyahu has said that the goals of the current war against Hamas are to bring back the hostages, destroy Hamas and remake Gaza so that no militant group can ever carry out the type of attack that Israel suffered last year, in which about 1,200 people were killed. But the families of the hostages and demonstrators that came out over the weekend believe the Israeli government should be more focused on hostage retrieval than any military or security objectives.

Aviva Siegel, one of 17 hostages released by Hamas on the third night of the temporary truce in November, called on Israeli authorities to "take responsibility" and put more effort into releasing her husband, who remains in Gaza, and other hostages held by Hamas and other militant groups in the strip.

"We are dying inside here," Siegel, 62, said at a Saturday rally in Tel Aviv.

Speaking to crowds in Jerusalem on Sunday, former Israeli prime minister and current opposition leader Yair Lapid said the government was ignoring the existence of the families of hostages.

"They stood outside the Kirya (the Israel Defense Forces headquarters in Tel Aviv), screamed their souls out, and nobody heard. They waved signs and no one saw," Lapid said.

Sunday's demonstration outside the Knesset, Israel's parliament, in Jerusalem was dispersed by force, but protesters appear to be readying themselves for more protests. Dozens of people were camped at tents outside the Knesset on Monday, and some vowed to stay there until Wednesday, when lawmakers head home for spring recess.

The protests appear have brought back to the fore deep societal divisions in Israel papered over by the initial reaction to the events of October 7. The months before the attack saw hundreds of thousands of Israelis participate in repeated demonstrations against reforms proposed by Netanyahu's government that [*critics said weakened the country's judiciary and eroded its systems of checks and balances*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/24/middleeast/israel-judicial-reforms-vote-explained-mime-intl/index.html).

Israelis of all political stripes, however, united in horror when details emerged of a terror attack in which young people attending a music festival and families living on kibbutzim were slaughtered or dragged to Gaza against their will.

Reservists from diverse backgrounds reported for duty as the military embarked on an [*unprecedented mobilization of 300,000 troops ahead of the incursion into Gaza*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/israel-ground-invasion-gaza-reservists-intl/index.html), while Netanyahu's government, the most right-wing in Israel's history, put aside its disagreements with opposition politicians such as Benny Gantz to form a united war cabinet.

After nearly six months of war, however, that unity has worn thin. Netanyahu, [*who on Sunday underwent a hernia operation*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/31/middleeast/netanyahu-hernia-surgery-intl/index.html), faces pressure both from the left for not doing enough to bring home the hostages and a possible rebellion on his right flank over exemptions from mandatory military service enjoyed by Israel's ultra-Orthodox community, a longtime flashpoint in Israeli ***politics***. The Israeli Supreme Court last week ordered the government to stop subsidizing Jewish religious seminaries whose students defied service orders.

And then there's international pressure and outrage over the way Israel has pursued a war that has seen upwards of 32,000 dead, more than a million people displaced and a manmade famine looming over Gaza.

Israel says it is abiding by international law and accused Hamas of treating Gazans like human shields, accusing the group of using facilities [*such as the Al-Shifa hospital complex to, in the words of the IDF, "conduct and promote terrorist activity."*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/18/middleeast/israel-raid-gaza-al-shifa-hospital-intl/index.html) Hamas has denied those claims.

But the staggering casualty figures and scenes of devastation across Gaza have unsettled even Israel's most ardent supporters, including the United States. Washington has in recent weeks been attempting to get Israel to call off a ground incursion into Rafah, a city on Gaza's border with Egypt where more than 1.3 million people - more than half of the enclave's population - are seeking refuge from the fighting.

The US and Israel are set to hold a virtual meeting on Rafah today, a US official told CNN. The two sides working toward holding an in-person meeting at a later date, the official said.

CNN's Xiaofei Xu, Mohammed Tawfeeq, Gul Tuysuz and Arlette Saenz contributed to this report

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