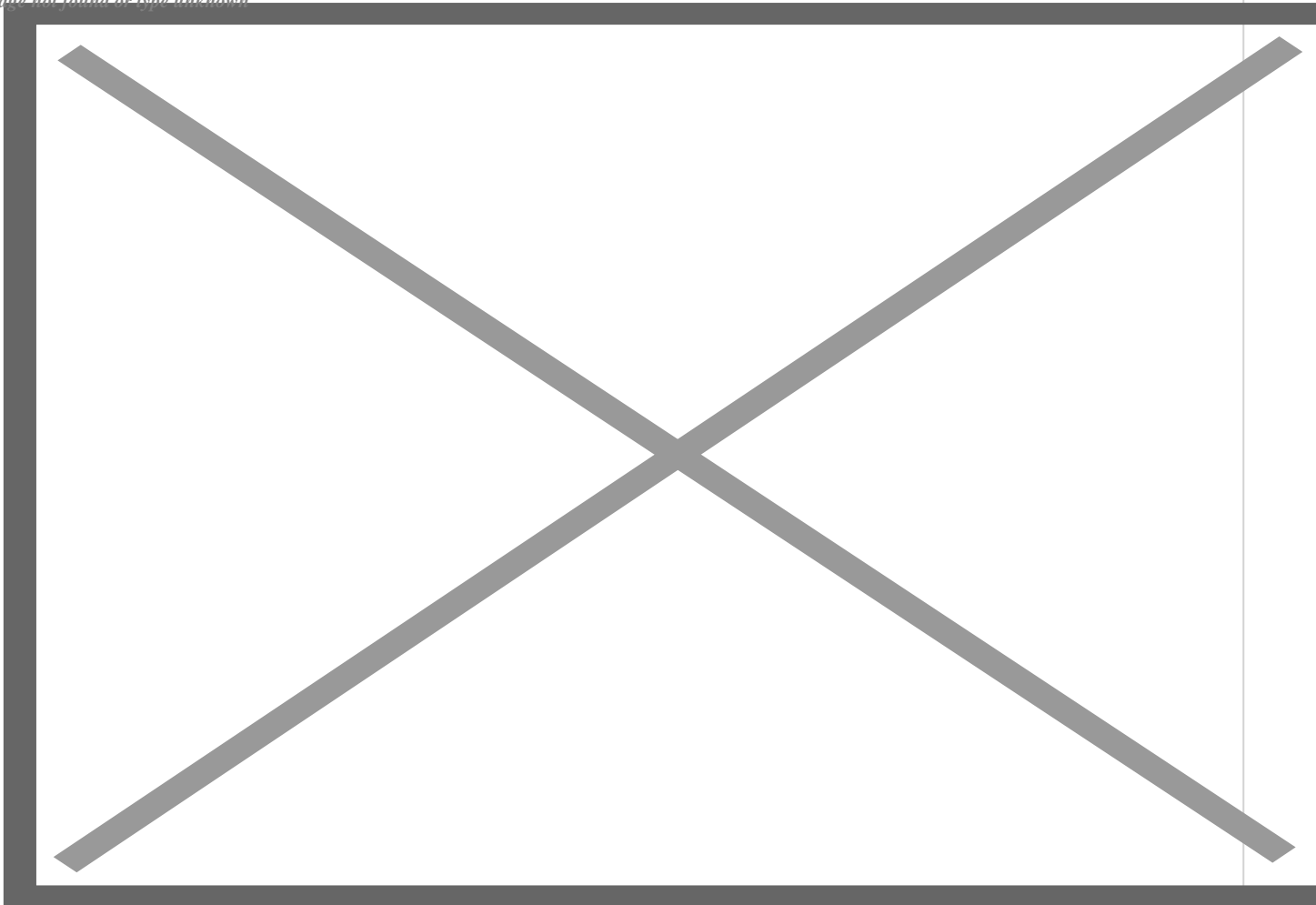


Protesters rally in Sweden against Israel's participation in Eurovision

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Malmo, May 9 (RHC)-- Thousands of anti-war demonstrators, including climate activist Greta Thunberg, have taken to the streets in the Swedish city of Malmo to protest against Israel's inclusion in Eurovision.

Protesters wearing keffiyehs and waving Palestinian flags filled the port city on Thursday, where the second semifinal is scheduled to take place later tonight.

“It’s important to be here,” said Amani Eli-Ali, a Malmo resident of Palestinian heritage. “It’s not OK for Sweden to arrange this Eurovision and have Israel in the contest.”

Calls to bar Israel from the competition have grown amid Israel’s war in Gaza, which has killed more than 34,900 people, mostly women and children, according to Palestinian authorities. Israel launched the assault after Palestinian group Hamas led an attack on Israel on October 7, killing at least 1,139 people, mostly civilians, according to an Al Jazeera tally based on Israeli statistics.

Eurovision has resisted calls to eject Israel but asked the country to modify the lyrics of its original song, October Rain, which appeared to reference the Hamas attack. Critics have pointed out that Russia was expelled in 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine, and Belarus was excluded the previous year following a crackdown on protesters.

The Israeli government warned that there was “tangible concern” that Israelis could be attacked, and Lotta Svensson, a police incident commander, told the news outlet Reuters over the weekend that law enforcement was “keeping a bit of an extra eye on Israel” because of high tensions over the war in Gaza.

But police said on Thursday that the protest has been mostly calm. A pro-Israel demonstration was also scheduled for later in the day.

“I’m here today because I see the hypocrisy and double standards around the world,” a Palestinian protester named Amar told Reuters. “We are against what’s happening in Gaza right now. But I also want people to understand that we don’t hate Jews.”

The war has been a source of contention within the competition for several months, including when the competition required Israel to change the lyrics of October Rain. The song was renamed Hurricane and Israel’s participating singer, Eden Golan, was allowed to remain in the competition. Golan was booed during her rehearsal for her performance.

“We’re supposed to be united by music but we’re not united, because Israel is participating,” Malmo resident Anders Trolle-Schultz, who attended the protest, told The Associated Press.

“I think Malmo should have kept Eurovision, but we should have told Israel either ‘Stay away,’ or maybe even say, why don’t we invite a Palestinian music group to participate? That would be fair.”

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