

Protests fill the streets to repudiate Israel in Eurovision

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Protesters opposing Israel's participation in the 68th edition of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) demonstrate in Malmo, Sweden [Tobias Schwarz/AFP]

Malmo, May 11 (RHC)-- Thousands of people have protested in the Swedish city of Malmo against Israel's participation in the Eurovision Song Contest, with Israel's war on Gaza casting a shadow over the final of the glitzy contest.

On Saturday, a large crowd of protesters gathered on the central square of the Swedish host city before marching towards the contest venue, waving Palestinian flags and shouting “Eurovision united by genocide” – a twist on the contest’s official slogan “united by music”.

One protester told Al Jazeera that it was unfair that a country that is “committing genocide” was allowed to take part in the event, and he said that demonstrators were upset by the confiscation of Palestinian flags and scarves by the authorities.

“Here in Malmo a lot of people are from Palestine and many of their families are getting hurt [in Gaza and Palestine] and they just feel angry about the situation and how the Swedish government and the city has handled this situation,” he said. “So there is a lot of frustration and a lot of anger.”

Reporting from Malmo, Al Jazeera’s Paul Rhys said that the protests over the past few days have been relatively peaceful, but as the final got under way, several protesters were taken away by the police.

“Quite a few demonstrators kind of got in here [the Malmo arena] in secret and started protesting with Palestinian flags. They were boxed in by the police and taken away one by one,” he said.

Police estimated that between 6,000 and 8,000 people joined the demonstrations in Malmo on Saturday.

Meanwhile, inside the auditorium French singer Slimane halted his rehearsal act earlier on Saturday to say it had been a childhood dream of his to sing for peace. “We need to be united by music,” Slimane said, referring to the official Eurovision slogan.

The final, the culmination of the festival of catchy songs, gaudy costumes and tongue-in-cheek kitsch, kicks off at 19:00 GMT.

Eurovision organizers, who have always billed the annual event as non-political, resisted calls to exclude Israel and in March, the EBU confirmed that Israel’s contestant Eden Golan would take part.

Golan’s song is an adaptation of an earlier version named, October Rain, which she modified after organisers deemed it too political because of its apparent allusions to the Hamas-led October 7 attack.

On Thursday, some booing was heard from the crowd before, during and after his performance in the semifinals, but there was also applause and Israeli flags being waved.

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also wished Golan good luck and said she had “already won” by enduring protests that he called a “horrible wave of anti-Semitism.”

Earlier on Saturday, the contest was also rattled earlier by the disqualification of Dutch contestant Joost Klein. “Swedish police have investigated a complaint made by a female member of the production crew after an incident following his performance in Thursday night’s semi-final,” the European Broadcasting Union, which oversees the event, said in a statement.

“While the legal process takes its course, it would not be appropriate for him to continue in the contest.”

Dutch broadcaster AVROTROS said the incident had involved Klein being filmed directly after coming off stage “against clearly made agreements.” According to an AVROTROS statement, Klein then repeatedly indicated he did not want to be filmed after which he made a “threatening movement” toward the camera, but did not touch the camerawoman.

“We stand for good manners – let there be no misunderstanding about that – but in our view, an exclusion order is not proportional to this incident,” AVROTROS said.

Klein had already courted controversy at Thursday’s news conference when he repeatedly covered his face with a Dutch flag, seemingly signifying he did not agree with being placed next to Israel’s contestant, Golan.

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