

Rutgers pro-Israel rally draws 250 supporters

Student organizations say Gaza operation is based on self-defense

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NJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

Hundreds gathered at Rutgers University Nov. 19 to demonstrate solidarity with Israel and support for its right to defend itself from Hamas rockets fired from the Gaza strip.

The rally, held on Brower Commons on the university's main campus in New Brunswick, drew some 250 students, staff, and rabbis from Rutgers Hillel, Chabad, and Rutgers Jewish Experience.

The demonstrators, some draped in Israeli flags and holding posters urging support for Israel, sang "Hatikva" and chanted "Am Yisrael chai" and "Two, four, six, eight, keep Israel a Jewish state."

Students also lined up to sign petitions to be sent to political leaders. The petition claimed that "children should be able to run to playgrounds and not to shelters; babies should be born into envi-

ronments free of rocket fire and sirens; and for the sake of citizens on both sides of the Israel-Gaza border, it is time for Hamas to act like a peaceful neighbor."

Israel's campaign to end Hamas rocket fire was launched on Nov. 14.

The most enthusiastic response came as passing vehicles on College Avenue responded to students holding signs asking them to honk if they support Israel. Particularly loud cheers went up when campus bus drivers sounded their horns.

"We wanted to put on a big show of solidarity," said Hillel Israel chair Alex Zeldin, who organized the event. "College campuses are not always the best place to say you are pro-Israel."

The senior from Roxbury said he was heartened by the response to the hastily organized event.

Hillel executive director Andrew Getraer said the rally made clear that "a large, diversified" community stood united behind Israel's right to defend its right to live in peace. He noted it was especially gratifying that the idea and organization of the rally emanated from student leaders.

"One of the things Hillel does is provide students with a platform for leadership, and this is such a beautiful example," said Getraer.

On the previous Friday night Rutgers Chabad sponsored a prayer vigil that also drew about 250 students, according to Rabbi Boruch Goodman. "Some who were not familiar faces to us also had their first-time experience with Shabbat," he said. "It was one more mitzva for Israel."

Jewish Xperience codirector Rabbi Meir Goldberg said his group was planning to set up tables to promote "People to People. Nation to Nation," which showcases Israel's environmental and humanitarian projects around the world. It is run through the Hasbara Fellowship program of Aish International.

"It's so wonderful to see so many people come together, united for Israel and united for peace," said Goldberg.

Tal Carmy, a sophomore from Aventura, Fla. — standing with a sign that said "Honk for Peace" — noted that she was half Israeli and had friends and family

Making a fashion statement for Israel are Yael Novick of West Orange, left, and Alie Reiter of Manalapan.

Photo by Debra Rubin



involved in the fighting.

"I also believe Israel is being seen differently than other nations," being judged negatively by those who are biased, she said.

Hannah Johnson, founder and president of Rutgers Christians United for Israel, said her allegiance with the Jewish state was based on both religious and personal convictions.

"As a Christian, I believe we should stand with the Jewish people, and as an American I believe we should stand with the only democracy in the Middle East," said the senior from Branchburg. "Israel is the only place in the Middle East where all three religions can pray without being persecuted."

Across the street, in front of the student center, six counter-protestors held signs calling for the end of "self-defense" shelling and proclaiming 45 dead Palestinians and three dead Israelis was enough.

Elizabeth Brady, a junior from Keyport, said the students were not affiliated with any organized group.

"We are tired of war," she said. "We are tired of hatred. We don't want any more dead Palestinians. We don't want any more dead Israelis. We have no side other than humanity."

Another group, Students for Justice in Palestine, planned to hold a pro-Palestinian rally at Brower Commons later that evening.

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OPERATION Pillar of Defense

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diversity of people and issues critical to the Jewish future."

Harris's presentation was preceded by introductory comments from Feldman and Central NJ AJC president Michael Feldstein and was followed by pleas from Mark Merkowitz, president of the Jewish Federation of PMB, and Gil Gordon, Central NJ AJC board member, for financial support for the people of Israel. The need for such support is particularly critical now, they said, in light of the recent Operation Pillar of Defense, Israel's response to

Attendees sing the American and Israeli national anthems before David Harris's presentation.

Hamas's firing of hundreds of rockets into the country's south.

The federation recently established a "Fund for Victims of Terror" and will forward 100 percent of all contributions "to relief services to recognize



what has happened to Israeli neighborhoods in the last few weeks," Merkowitz said.

PMB federation executive director Andy Frank said, "In light of the recent crisis, we're pleased to partner with AJC and offer the community an opportunity to show their solidarity for Israel."

To contribute to the special Fund for Victims of Terror, contact the Jewish Federation of Princeton Mercer Bucks at 609-219-0555 or visit www.jewishpmb.org.

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