Jewish man succumbs to wounds day after altercation at anti-Israel protest in LA

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-man-said-struck-by-pro-palestinian-protester-in-los-angeles-succumbs-to-injury/>

A Jewish man succumbed to his wounds on Monday, a day after an altercation at a pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel protest in the Los Angeles area.

The 69-year-old man identified as Paul Kessler fell and hit his head following a confrontation during competing pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian demonstrations in suburban Los Angeles, authorities said.

Kessler’s death was being investigated as a homicide and authorities haven’t ruled out the possibility a hate crime occurred, said a statement from the Ventura County Sheriff’s Department. No arrests have been announced.

Kessler was injured shortly before 3:30 p.m. Sunday during competing demonstrations in Thousand Oaks, a city of about 125,000 northwest of Los Angeles. Police received reports that a battery had occurred and deputies sent to the scene found Kessler suffering from a head wound, the department said.

‘Witness accounts indicated that Kessler was involved in a physical altercation with counter-protestor(s). During the altercation, Kessler fell backwards and struck his head on the ground,’ the department said.

According to a statement by the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, the man was struck in the head with a megaphone held by one of the pro-Palestinian protesters in Westlake Village.

However, local rabbi Michael Barclay tweeted that he had spoken with the local police chief and said the circumstances surrounding Kessler’s death were still unclear.

‘It is not clear yet exactly what happened other than an elderly Jew was counter-protesting at a Gazan demonstration, hit the ground, and died. We DO NOT KNOW at this time if he fell, was pushed, or was attacked. Please do not spread rumors. We will know soon what happened,’ Barclay wrote.

He later added that police have conflicting reports of what happened and have interviewed a suspect who was identified on social media as having been at the event.

Barclay said that police do not have video of the moments leading up to when Kessler landed on the ground. Kessler’s phone is believed to have footage from the altercation and police are working to get it unlocked, according to local affiliate NBC4.

The rabbi added that the police chief informed him that the implication of a homicide charge ‘can range from an accident to intentional murder and anywhere in between.’

A brief video circulating on social media shows an elderly man in a blue-and-white striped shirt and jeans lying on a sidewalk and clutching his head in a pool of blood. A woman wearing pro-Palestinian symbols crouches down to tend to him, as does another man. An Israeli flag is leaning against a nearby wall.

Calls to the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office and Misaskim, a local group that assists with Jewish burial, were not immediately returned. The federation said in its statement that it is awaiting more information from law enforcement.

‘We are devastated to learn of the tragic death of an elderly Jewish man who was struck in the head by a megaphone wielded by a pro-Palestinian protestor in Westlake Village,’ the federation statement says. ‘Our hearts are with the family of the victim.’

The man’s death occurred a month into a war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which began after the terror group invaded Israel on Oct. 7, killing and wounding thousands, mostly civilians. Mass pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian demonstrations have occurred nationwide and globally, and officials have warned of rising antisemitism and islamophobia in the weeks since Oct. 7. While other physical altercations and assaults have taken place surrounding protests or the hanging of posters, this is the first death reported due to a protest connected to the war.

The federation’s statement also referenced previous antisemitic incidents in the area this year, including the arrest of a man in February who shot two men outside their synagogues. On Oct. 26, a man was arrested after breaking into a Jewish family’s home and saying he wanted to kill Jews. The suspect in that case did not injure anyone.

‘We remind you that this is the fourth major antisemitic crime committed in Los Angeles this year alone,’ the statement said. ‘Violence against our people has no place in civilized society. We demand safety. We will not tolerate violence against our community. We will do everything in our power to prevent it.’