

British government seeks to outlaw pro-Palestinian protests

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UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Home Secretary Suella Braverman are using Israel's war on Gaza and the Palestinians to launch the largest attack on free speech and the right to protest in post-war British history.

With several thousand people protesting across the country in solidarity with the Palestinians, Sunak threatened on Monday, "I'd just remind everyone that Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation. People should not be supporting Hamas and we will make sure that we hold people to account if they are."

He added that the police had been told to "clamp down on any behaviour that falls foul of the law".

Earlier that day, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly had told protestors to stay at home: "There is no need, there's no necessity for people to come out. It causes distress. This is a difficult, delicate situation."

This followed Braverman's statement Sunday warning, "I expect the police to use the full force of the law against displays of support for Hamas, other proscribed terrorist groups or attempts to intimidate British Jews."

On Tuesday, she made clear how widely the net is being cast in a public letter to the police, telling officers, "It is not just explicit pro-Hamas symbols and chants that are cause for concern. I would encourage police to consider whether chants such as: 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' should be understood as an expression of a violent desire to see Israel erased from the world, and whether its use in certain contexts may amount to a racially aggravated section 5 public order offence."

Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 prohibits "abusive or insulting words, or disorderly behaviour" and the display of "threatening, abusive or insulting" writing or imagery in hearing or sight of a person

"likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress."

Braverman's letter continues, "Behaviours that are considered legitimate in some circumstances, for example, the waving of a Palestinian flag, may not be legitimate such as when intended to glorify acts of terrorism."

She "encourage[s] all chief officers to ensure that any protests which could exacerbate community tensions by way of offensive placards, chants or behaviours that could be construed as incitement or harassment, have a strong police presence to ensure perpetrators are appropriately dealt with."

This is a mandate, from the highest levels of the state, for mass arrests—facilitated by the raft of dictatorial anti-protest legislation passed in the last two years. A national demonstration in defence of Gaza is planned for this Saturday outside Downing Street in London.

The British government's extraordinary edict of political suppression builds on a years-long campaign to criminalise political opposition to the Israeli state and to brand socialist views as "extremist".

Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters were driven out of the Labour Party by a witch-hunt over manufactured, politically motivated claims of widespread "left" anti-Semitism—equating opposition to Zionism and Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians with hostility to Jews, even when those accused were themselves Jewish. Corbyn's political cowardice allowed this campaign to succeed, with the Labour leader implementing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)'s reactionary definition of antisemitism within the party.

The IHRA definition equating criticism of Israel and its policies with anti-Semitism has since been rolled out across society, most prominently on university campuses but also to slander artists such as Roger

Waters—as a weapon of political intimidation and censorship intended to silence left-wing organisations for whom the defence of the Palestinians against Israeli and imperialist oppression is a fundamental principle.

The latest threats go far beyond anything seen before. Opposition to Israel and its treatment of the Palestinian territories and people motivates millions of workers and young people—not least the 3.9 million Muslims in the UK from the Indian subcontinent and throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia—and is the overarching concern for tens of thousands of activists. All of them are now threatened with arrest for expressing these views publicly, at a time when the Netanyahu government is threatening the Gaza concentration camp with annihilation.

This situation is unprecedented. Throughout the 35 years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, protests were held in Britain not only in support of the broad cause of Irish independence but for the military campaign waged by the Irish Republican Army. The demand for “Victory to the IRA” was never proscribed even under conditions of bombing campaigns and brutal repression of the Republican movement because this would have discredited any claim to Britain being a democracy.

Mass protests were mounted against South African apartheid at a time when the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and the right-wing media were denouncing Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress as a terrorist organisation.

In 2003, over a million people marched against the Iraq War while Tony Blair’s government was claiming Sadaam Hussein’s government posed an immediate threat to British citizens.

By the standards of today’s ruling class, all of this is beyond the pale. Social tensions and the threat of war are now so acute that democratic rights must be totally eviscerated.

None of this will have the desired effect of intimidating opponents of the Israeli onslaught. It will rather stiffen the resolve of workers and young people to oppose Israel’s brutal repression of the Palestinians and its imperialist backers in the UK, the United States and Europe.

It will bring home to workers and youth the nature of the fight they must wage. Attempts to suppress protests against Israel are the spearhead of a drive to authoritarianism made necessary by the eruption of

imperialist militarism all over the world, with Britain playing a leading role in NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine and in advanced preparations for hostilities targeting China. War abroad means dictatorship at home. The struggle to defend democratic rights and against war are wholly intertwined.



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