

# UK government demands intensified clampdown on protests in defence of Palestinians

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The British government is demanding stepped-up repression against those demonstrating in defence of the Palestinians being massacred by Israel’s armed forces.

Three were arrested in London during protests at the Israel Embassy on Monday where a massive police presence was mobilised. On Wednesday, a further four people were arrested outside Manchester Central Library in St. Peter’s Square, in a protest against a vigil by supporters of the Israeli state. The protests in support of the Palestinian people, who are being subjected to collective punishment and other war crimes, are among several in towns and cities across Britain since last Saturday.

A state crackdown is being imposed amid hysterical and unprecedented calls by the ruling Conservatives that anyone opposing Israel’s genocidal war is treated as a supporter of terrorism. Home Secretary Suella Braverman has called on police to criminalise protest, declaring 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.”

In the same letter to police she declared, “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.” Hamas was proscribed in Britain in 2021 as a “terrorist” organisation.

While Greater Manchester Police said four people were arrested on suspicion of breaching the peace, video footage on social media shows one young man—with a Palestinian flag draped around his shoulders—being

frogmarched towards a police van by a swarm of officers, with protesters demanding to know why he was being arrested. Just before he was bundled into the police van, a police officer is seen confiscating his Palestinian flag.

The police statement read, “They were not arrested for supporting Palestine—GMP understands that members of Greater Manchester’s communities are devastated by the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, and that people have a right to express their support for both Israel and Palestine. The force draws a clear distinction between support for Palestine and support for the proscribed terrorist organisation ‘Hamas’”. They claimed the suspects were arrested “following an assessment that their actions had the potential to cause disorder at an otherwise peaceful event”, but police provided no evidence to support this.

The *Manchester Evening News* (MEN) reported Wednesday evening, “One person was later de-arrested following further investigations, with the remaining three still in custody.” The MEN’s report indicates the extent of the police build-up underway, “The vigil was heavily policed on Wednesday night, with roads closed through the centre of Manchester and a sea of high visibility jackets marking out the groups of GMP officers surrounding the crowds.” According to a local journalist posting on X (formerly Twitter), after the young man was arrested by police, “They then put a section 35 on Manchester City Centre, threatening bystanders with arrest.”

Under Section 35 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, a police constable and/or police community support officer in uniform have the power to exclude a person or people from an area for a period of up to 48 hours with a police Inspector’s authority.

Other events underscore the outlawing of protests as

Israel's jets pound Gaza and 100,000 Israeli troops and hundreds of tanks and warplanes mass at the border ready to unleash an unprecedented blood bath against the besieged population.

On Wednesday, the Student Union at University College London (UCL) suspended the UCL Marxist Society, a naked attack on free speech and the right of assembly. The Marxist Society is the student organisation of the International Marxist Tendency (IMT).

A statement by the Marxist Society revealed it had "received e-mails from UCL SU demanding we take down posters and social media posts for our meeting tonight as they could be construed as 'inciting violence'. By refusing to comply they have now told us that our society has been suspended pending investigation". The statement added, "Our posters show a Palestinian flag with the slogan 'Intifada until victory! The fight for a free Palestine'. Intifadas are mass uprisings against the Israeli state by the Palestinians."

UCL's Student Union is affiliated with the National Union of Students, which is dominated by the Labour Party.

The move against the IMT's student society coincided with a letter by Tory Education Secretary Gillian Keegan and Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education Robert Halfon to university vice-chancellors demanding they act "swiftly and decisively" to stamp out support for the Palestinian cause. Their letter—issued under the cynical guise of opposing "implicit or explicit" threats to Jewish students—dishonestly conflates protests against the atrocities of the far-right Israeli government with anti-Semitism. The ministers demanded that university vice chancellors "act quickly and appropriately if you become aware of any antisemitic abuse, harassment or discrimination."

The letter made clear that Student Societies are being targeted for political censorship: "We have seen evidence of a number of student societies that support Palestinians sending out inflammatory messages that show support for Hamas, which is, as you know, a proscribed terrorist organisation."

The ministers also attacked what they described as a "grossly insensitive and unhelpful statement" issued by the University and College Union (UCU), complaining the union represents "some of the very lecturers that Jewish students would be looking to for support".

The UCU statement called for an "immediate ceasefire and de-escalation", that "must include an end to the blockade of Gaza by the Israeli military and a halt to

further violence against civilians by Hamas, before any more lives are lost". It concluded, "the events of recent days are part of a continuing cycle of violence that has been the result of decades of brutal occupation. Achieving a lasting peace in the region must start with an end to the occupation and a recognition of the rights of all people."

This is anathema to a government that has fully endorsed Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians, by a war machine armed to the teeth by the US and Britain.

The Tory government has introduced a raft of authoritarian legislation in recent months in preparation for the banning outright of protests and strikes. However, sections of the ruling class are wary of the backlash threatened by Braverman's inflammatory calls to ban flags and chants which have been a prominent feature of pro-Palestinian demonstrations for years. On Thursday, ahead of "March for Palestine, End the Violence, End Apartheid" protests taking place this Saturday in London, the Metropolitan Police—who cover the capital—have claimed they will not treat the holding of a Palestinian flag as a criminal offence.

Met deputy commissioner Dame Lynne Owens said, "What we cannot do is interpret support for the Palestinian cause more broadly as automatically being support for Hamas or any other proscribed group, even when it follows so soon after an attack carried out by that group and when to many the link seems indisputable."

Yet demands across the media and political establishment for criminalising protestors on precisely this basis are growing by the hour.

The events of the last days in Britain must serve as an urgent warning to the working class. The ruling elite is determined to eviscerate democratic rights to enforce its agenda of war and austerity.



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