

London's Met Police arrests 77 in crackdown on national Gaza protest

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London's Metropolitan Police carried out a major crackdown on Saturday's national March for Palestine, making 77 arrests. These included the brutal arrest by a 10-man police snatch squad of Chris Nineham, a leading figure in the Stop the War Coalition (STWC).

Nineham, the vice chair of STWC, has been head steward of the national Palestine marches, attended by millions in total, that have taken place over the last 15 months in the capital.

He was held overnight, charged with organising an illegal demonstration and finally released 19 hours after his arrest—not even allowed to address his supporters outside the police station as his release came with the anti-democratic bail condition that he attend no protests.

While not arrested on Saturday, two of the speakers at the rally—former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his former shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, also a current MP—were set to be interviewed Sunday under caution by the Met. The BBC reported that they will “voluntarily attend a police station in the capital as the Met investigates what it says was a coordinated effort by organisers to breach conditions imposed on the event.”

Saturday's march was the UK's 23rd national protest against the genocide in Gaza and attended by tens of thousands. The organisers faced repeated attempts over the last weeks to have it banned, or massively restricted, and demanded their democratic right to march up until the very eve of the protest. Police eventually permitted it be “limited to a static protest in Whitehall”—the less than half-a-mile in length road that runs from Trafalgar Square to Parliament Square.

Masses of police were mobilised for the day—including from other forces around Britain—interspersed throughout the Whitehall area, with roads blocked off in all directions. Police were also stationed in the vicinity of Portland Place, where the march was originally scheduled to have begun, outside the HQ of the BBC.

Nineham was arrested following the speeches given at the rally by the various leaders of the Palestine Coalition

organising the demonstration. Several condemned the police's attempt, with the backing of a substantial number of MPs, to ban and restrict the march.

Ben Jamal, a leader of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (PSC), stated at the rally's conclusion that leaders of the six bodies making up the coalition, plus platform speakers “will now walk as a delegation towards the BBC. We will carry with us flowers that we intend to lay at the gates of the BBC to protest at their failure to report the truth of genocide and to mark the cost in Palestinian lives of that failure”.

Jamal pledged, as then occurred, “We will walk peacefully, we will walk in silence. If the police stop us, which they probably will, we will lay those flowers at the feet of the police force to mark their complicity in supporting genocide by suppressing protest against that genocide.” As fellow speakers, Corbyn and McDonnell, along with Labour MP Apsana Begum, marched with the organisers listed by Jamal.

Thousands followed them in silence down Whitehall and into Trafalgar Square. Police claimed in an X post at 3:27 p.m. that those marching were a group which “forced its way through the police line” and were in “breach of the conditions”. They “should now disperse and leave the area” or “will be arrested”.

Arresting Nineham, they dragged him to the ground before locking him in a waiting police van.

In a post later on Saturday, Corbyn, a local London MP, stated, “This is not an accurate description of events at all... We did not force our way through. When we reached Trafalgar Square, we informed police that we would go no further, lay down flowers and disperse. At that point, the Chief Steward, Chris Nineham was arrested. We then turned back and dispersed.”

The Palestine Coalition also issued a statement opposing the Met's “misleading narrative about the events”.

It added, “On the day we were confronted with extremely heavy handed and aggressive policing,” noting how the met had “imposed a series of complex restrictions” with less than a day's notice, including preventing assembly right in

the centre of Whitehall for part of the day to allow space for a children’s marching band to proceed up and down”.

This was the Gordon’s School pipes and drums band, whose annual march commemorates the death of General Charles George Gordon (1833-85)—a major figure in British imperialism’s colonial history.

The statement noted that when the delegation from the platform reached the police line at the top of Whitehall, “they were not stopped as expected but were instead invited to proceed into Trafalgar Square by the police”.

After the delegation were blocked from leaving the square, they requested that a maximum of 25 people be allowed to proceed and were told to wait for a decision, during which time “the police violently and for no apparent reason arrested the chief steward of the rally, Chris Nineham.”

The delegation laid down their flowers and dispersed, while “Ben Jamal and Ismail Patel [from Friends of Al-Aqsa] used a megaphone to call on the crowd that had gathered around them to do the same, which people then did. At no point was there an organised breach of conditions imposed by the police.”

The police nonetheless carried out 77 arrests, of which 65 were for “breach of conditions [on the protest]” and five for “public order offences”. The BBC reported Sunday that that of those arrested, “24 people had been bailed and 48 remained in custody.”

Signifying a new stage in the repression of the right to protest, the police described Saturday’s events as a “coordinated effort to breach Public Order Act conditions and cause serious disruption to Londoners.”

This was the culmination of a long effort by the police, the BBC and many MPs to disrupt, provoke and stir up animosity against a demonstration which was planned to go ahead weeks ago.

On January 10, the Met banned the protest from assembling at the BBC’s Broadcasting House headquarters in Portland Place as was planned. The police claimed the ban “reflected on the views of local community and business representatives”, including congregation members at a synagogue.

As Nineham noted in a response published January 12, there were “two synagogues in the general area... The synagogues are not actually on the route, so given the number of synagogues in central London, this decision would mean no Palestine demonstrations in the West End.”

The banning of the protest at the BBC was demanded by many MPs and a venal media who have slandered the anti-genocide rallies from the outset as “hate marches”. On January 8, the *Sun* reported that “more than 80 politicians”, MPs and peers, “implored Met Police chief Sir Mark Rowley to use his powers to change the route of a Palestine

Solidarity Campaign protest,” claiming previous demonstrations have “left the Jewish community feeling intimidated.”

The march from Broadcasting House was banned the following day—an action opposed by just 39 MPs in a Parliament of 650, showing how far to the right the political establishment has shifted.

On January 17, just 24 hours before it was set to go ahead, with the march’s organisers insisting on their democratic right to protest, the Palestinian Coalition issued a statement explaining, “Yesterday, the Metropolitan Police publicly announced its intention to force our protest to assemble at Russell Square and threatened to arrest anyone assembling elsewhere.” Only after further protests from the organisers did police allow the demonstration to assemble in Whitehall.

These events confirm that the British state—up to its neck in the slaughter in Gaza and NATO’s war against Russia—and headed by Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour government, has concluded that mass protests against war can no longer be tolerated. They make good on Met assistant commissioner Matt Twist’s threat last May, speaking about the Gaza protests to the right-wing Policy Exchange think tank: “On occasion we did not move quickly to make arrests ... We are now much more focused on identifying reasonable grounds for arrest, acting where needed, and then investigating, so in these circumstances it’s very likely arrests would be made more quickly now.”

But even such repression is just a foretaste of the crackdown to come. On January 14, the Palestinian Coalition revealed that in attempting to ensure their plan for a protest on January 18 went ahead, a meeting was held with the police that day. They explained that the Met had by then advanced, “the spurious suggestion that we hold our march on a day other than a Saturday—the day on which all major demonstrations in London are held—something which everybody knows would not be possible on anything like the same scale.

“During the meeting, the police confirmed that they are seeking to impose an effective ban on protests in support of Palestinian rights at the BBC on any Saturday. Disgracefully, they explicitly conceded that this proscription would not apply to those protesting for other causes including pro-Israel demonstrations.”



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