

More than 80 UK protesters arrested, former head of the army speaks of “proxies”

Martin Smith
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This weekend, another 80-plus people were arrested on the streets of London, Cardiff, Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and Derry for expressing support for the direct action protest group Palestine Action.

Roughly 300 police were mobilised in London, arresting 46 people peacefully gathered around statues of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela in Parliament Square, holding signs reading, “I oppose genocide. I support Palestine Action.”

In the week before, the former chief of the general staff (head of the British Army), General Sir Patrick Sanders, was sitting in his Wiltshire garden telling a *Telegraph* journalist that war with Russia by 2030 was a “realistic possibility” and that hostile states were using “proxies ‘to attack British interests in the UK.’”

Sanders, the *Telegraph*’s Danielle Sheridan writes, “speculated that this could include the activist group Palestine Action,” telling her, “it’s entirely possible that there will have been some direct or covert sponsorship of groups like that.”

Although the specific connection he alleged was with Iran, the bulk of his comments were directed against Russia and the prospect of a war in which “the British Army is too small to survive more than the first few months of an intensive engagement, and we’re going to need more”; where civilians needed to show “resilience” in the face of “strikes,” “loss of power, loss of fuel.”

Having previously argued for the army to prepare for “warfare at its most violent,” Sanders is no stranger to speaking bluntly about the discussions ongoing in the heart of the British state. His comments to the *Telegraph*, coming midway between two weekends of mass arrests, reveal the essential connection between the war plans of British imperialism and the crackdown on the right to protest.

So far, repression of political activity is targeted specifically at those acting against the Gaza genocide, and the British government’s complicity in this crime. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and the Labour Party are well aware of their isolation over this issue, set against enormous popular opposition which they are seeking to intimidate.

But they have another motivation. The precedent set by the proscription of Palestine Action and criminalisation of swathes of anti-war, anti-militarist opinion can also be put to use in preparing the home front for armed conflict directly between the UK and a major adversary.

Home Secretary Yvette Cooper’s statement to the House of Commons introducing the PA proscription made clear this line of thought. She denounced “a nationwide campaign of direct criminal action against businesses and institutions, including key national infrastructure and defence firms that provide services and supplies to support Ukraine, NATO, Five Eyes allies and the UK defence enterprise.”

Cooper emphasised: “The UK’s defence enterprise is vital to the nation’s national security and this Government will not tolerate those who put that security at risk.” In the words of the government’s lawyer at PA’s appeal for interim relief of the order—reported by former British diplomat turned whistleblower and journalist Craig Murray, who attended the case—“We accept of course that it is draconian: and deliberately so.”

The British state has been as good as its word, arresting scores of people under the Terrorism Act since.

No charges appear to have been laid, but Murray—who is well connected with lawyers for PA and has extensive experience of the workings of the British

state—argues: “The state is holding off charging people with terrorism offences for supporting Palestine Action until after the application for judicial review is heard from 21 July, so they can claim there is no serious effect on civil liberties. They will charge everyone after the hearing.”

If this is the attitude to protests against British complicity in Israel’s genocide, then what will it be to action taken against political opposition to a war involving the “whole-of-nation effort” Sanders has spoken about on a previous occasion?

A warning was given in 2022 when Starmer, then making his pitch for a Labour government before the ruling class, penned an opinion piece in the *Guardian* attacking “the likes of Stop the War coalition” over their protests against NATO pouring “oil on the fire” of the conflict with Russia.

They were, he said, “not benign voices for peace. At best they are naive; at worst they actively give succour to authoritarian leaders who directly threaten democracies.”

This was a threat levelled by a former director of public prosecutions and aspiring prime minister in an article declaring Labour’s “unshakeable” commitment to NATO.

Starmer was drawing on the material produced by the UK’s Commission for Countering Extremism in 2019, which argued:

the ideology of “anti-imperialism” draws sectarian far-left groups, as well as their fellow-travellers across the broader left, into a position of solidarity with terrorist organisations and violently repressive regimes—especially if those organisations and regimes are actively engaged in military struggle against the US and its allies, including the UK.

Five years later, Conservative minister Michael Gove introduced a new broad definition of “extremism” with the complaint, “Most extremist materials and activities are not illegal and do not meet the terrorism or the national security threshold.”

Another year on—under Starmer’s Labour government and more than three years into the NATO-

Russia war in Ukraine—a protest group has been labelled a terrorist organisation and the deputy chair of the Stop the War Coalition Chris Nineham, STWC Steering Committee Chair Alex Kenny, Steering Committee member Ben Jamal—plus Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament General Secretary Sophie Bolt—are all being prosecuted for Public Order Act offences for leading a protest.

There is massive opposition to these police-state measures, being spearheaded by the proscription of Palestine Action. But for this sentiment to take root in the broadest possible sections of the working class, and to find organised form in a mass movement, the full implications of these attacks must be made widely known.

All workers are in the firing line of the assault on democratic rights because they are all in the literal firing line of the wars being actively planned for by British imperialism—whether directly, or indirectly though savage cuts to social spending to pay for the military and the outlawing of strikes on “national security” grounds.

Combating this danger means mobilising the working class, the decisive social force in capitalist society, to defend the first targets of Starmer’s authoritarianism as part of a broader socialist, anti-war movement.



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