

UK Labour government bans Al-Quds Day march as crackdown on pro-Palestinian movement intensifies

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The Labour government has banned this Sunday's Al-Quds Day march in London, marking a significant escalation in the state's crackdown on the pro-Palestinian, anti-war movement.

Al-Quds Day—named after the Arabic name for Jerusalem—is traditionally marked by marches and protests around the world in solidarity with the Palestinian people and opposition to Israeli occupation. The event was first established shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, with demonstrations taking place internationally.

In Britain, the Al-Quds Day march has been held for four decades, generally peacefully and without major incident.

The principal exception occurred in 2017 when a fascist, Darren Osborne, attempted to attack the protest with the aim of killing participants including then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Mayor of London Sadiq Khan. Unable to reach it through a police cordon, he proceeded, just hours later, to carry out a murderous attack at Finsbury Park mosque.

March organisers the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) made these points in a March 8 letter to the Metropolitan Police, but they fell on deaf ears. Acting in close collaboration with the police and responding to demands from right-wing political figures, including Zionist organisations, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood ordered the prohibition of the demonstration scheduled for March 15.

The ban is the first on a demonstration since 2012, when one was imposed on a proposed march of the far-right English Defence League through east London.

Not only is the march banned under Section 13 of the draconian Public Order Act, but Mahmood also prohibited “processions in London related to al-Quds Day involving

protesters and counter-protesters, for a full month from Wednesday, March 11.” London's Metropolitan Police commissioner will be permitted to request a further extension.

The IHRC responded by announcing that a static protest would take place instead of the planned march.

The government's decision follows more than two-and-a-half years of mass protests in Britain against Israel's genocide in Gaza. Since the eruption of demonstrations in October 2023, successive governments—first Conservative and now Labour—have sought to criminalise and suppress these events in which hundreds of thousands have regularly participated.

Conservative ministers repeatedly denounced them as “hate marches”. Under the Starmer government, the Met have questioned, arrested and charged leading figures in the Palestine Coalition which organises the demonstrations, including Members of Parliament. They have issued restrictions on the route and times of marches.

Police have also carried out almost 3,000 arrests, under anti-terror legislation, of those opposed to the proscription of Palestine Action.

Now, amid Britain's growing involvement in a new war and regime-change operation against Iran, the government has taken the unprecedented step of banning a pro-Palestine demonstration outright.

Mahmood agreed Tuesday evening to the Met's request to ban the march. Earlier that day, courts minister Sarah Sackman told LBC Radio that the event must be viewed as a “hate” march that was “thoroughly anti-British and I expect the police and the home secretary to take the necessary action against those people.”

Mayor Khan, in remarks dripping with hypocrisy, declared that “one of the joys of living in a democracy” is

the right to demonstrate, while claiming that Mahmood's decision "isn't diluting or diminishing the rights we have". It was simply "this particular march the police have concerns with."

In a House of Commons statement the following day on "protest policing" Mahmood said she agreed to the request for a ban to "prevent serious public disorder." She added, echoing the argument of the Met in its request to ban the march, "It comes at a time when the Iranian regime is attacking British forces and bases, as well as those of our allies."

What Mahmood didn't say is that Iran's action is retaliatory. Tehran acted in response to US and Israeli warplanes bombing locations throughout its sovereign territory, killing civilians and senior government figures up to and including the head of state.

The Met claimed similarly, "We must also consider that the security services have been publicly clear about the threats we are facing on UK soil from the Iranian regime. In the last year MI5 and Counter Terrorism Policing have foiled over 20 Iranian state-backed attacks on the UK."

This is an outrageous attempt to associate people exercising their democratic rights with violent attacks. It should be pointed out that claims of planned "Iranian state-backed" operations are routinely made by right-wing forces without a shred of evidence ever being provided.

Any genuine risk of violence is a result of pro-war Iranian monarchists and fascists being emboldened to carry out attacks on protesters by the government's support for the US-Israeli war and regime-change operation against Iran.

Last week, a public meeting organised by the Greater Manchester Stop the War Coalition in Manchester—addressed by Your Party anti-war MP Zarah Sultana—was attacked by hundreds of pro-war Iranian monarchists and fascists who attempted to storm the venue.

Under current legislation, neither the home secretary nor the Met have any powers to ban a static demonstration from taking place, but Mahmood gave the signal for a police crackdown against the one now planned by the IHRC organisers.

She told MPs that police would "be able to impose conditions, such as dictating the precise location and timing." Under Section 14 of the Public Order Act, police can also restrict the maximum number of participants. These were the "operational decisions for the Met police to make in the coming days," said Mahmood.

The Home Secretary assured every right-winger,

monarchist and fascist that "the full force of the law will be enforced if hate crimes, or other crimes, are committed."

Her actions received immediate backing from the Conservatives. Shadow Home Secretary Chris Philp demanded further action against pro-Iranian demonstrations, including events mourning the death of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei.

Seizing his opportunity to push for wider political repression, Philp declared that "the problems with the al-Quds march go beyond simply the risk of serious disorder...Chants at al-Quds marches in the past have called for intifada and revolution." Such "extremism," he said, "has no place in the UK." His definition of extremism included "antisemitism"—a term that has been systematically weaponised to smear opponents of the Israeli government.

The Labour government is already acting along these lines. Measures introduced over the last decade under the guise of combating "extremism", maintaining "public order" and preventing "serious disruption" are being used to criminalise political dissent and suppress opposition to imperialist war.

Workers and young people must oppose the Al-Quds ban as a fundamental assault on democratic rights. Every attack on the right to protest—initially directed against pro-Palestinian demonstrators—will ultimately be used against the entire working class in its struggles against war and exploitation.

The defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the fight against Britain's participation in the criminal assault on Iran, the expanding conflict in the Middle East and the spread of wars across the globe.

As the Socialist Equality Party has argued, "What is needed is a fight for socialist internationalism among workers of all countries, who have shared interest in bringing down the warmongers attacking their jobs, wages, living conditions and democratic rights.

"Only a movement totally independent of the capitalist parties can put a stop to this barbarism."



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