

# Starmer government mounts mass police crackdown against London protests, targeting pro-Palestinian movement

Robert Stevens  
15 May 2026

Britain's ruling elite is preparing an unprecedented crackdown in central London on Saturday, directed above all against opposition to the Gaza genocide.

The Metropolitan Police's £4 million operation has the character of a military deployment. Alongside 4,000 officers, the force is placing armoured police vehicles on standby.

On Saturday, a far-right "Unite the Kingdom" march organised by the fascist Tommy Robinson is being held. It was prioritised by the police over a planned demonstration by the Palestine Coalition marking the 78th anniversary of Israel's expulsion of the Palestinians. A counter-demonstration to Robinson's, organised by Stand Up To Racism, will also be held.

London is also hosting football's showpiece FA Cup Final, usually attended by 90,000.

The Met is using the pretext of possible clashes to mount an operation "unprecedented in recent years", requiring "the most assertive possible use of our powers including strict conditions."

While routinely restricting national anti-genocide protests in London, Met updates on such stipulations generally amount to a few paragraphs, with maps showing march routes and times. This time its update, "4,000 officers prepare for day of protest in central London", ran to almost 3,000 words.

It reports the comments of Met Deputy Assistant Commissioner James Harman given at a May 13 media briefing that the 4,000 officers "will include 660 officers from other police forces across England and Wales. In addition to the officers you see out on foot, there will be specialist traffic units, mounted officers, police dogs, police helicopters, drone teams and detectives to investigate offences that take place at protests."

Harman said all police officers will be equipped with riot gear, described as "their protective public order equipment".

He announced, "This Saturday is also the first time we will

be using live facial recognition as part of a protest policing operation." While it is being "deployed in the London borough of Camden in an area likely to be used by those attending the Unite the Kingdom event", this sets a precedent for a digital dragnet against all future demonstrations.

The Met announced they "will have specialist armed vehicles available for use as a very high level contingency option": an 18-strong fleet of SandCat armoured vehicles manufactured by Israeli company Plasan. The same vehicle has been extensively used by Israel's military during the genocide in Gaza. Upon purchasing them, the Met said they were intended only for the "most serious public disorder" situations and "high-risk armed policing operations".

Armoured vehicles were last prominently deployed by the Met in London during the 2011 riots that followed the police killing of Mark Duggan. The riots were met with a vicious state clampdown by the then Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, as it intensified the Brown Labour government's austerity offensive.

Mass arrests took place, with over 4,000 people detained nationally across 19 police forces. More than 3,000 people were dragged through the courts, many hit with severe sentences, even for trivial offences.

This "assembly line justice", with courts operating through the night to punish those arrested, was overseen by man of the state Keir Starmer, then serving as Director of Public Prosecutions—prior to being fast-tracked into parliament as a Labour MP, on his way to Downing Street.

As DPP, Starmer visited Highbury Magistrates Court in North London at 4 a.m. to boost prosecutors' morale. Praising the railroading of young people into prison, he said, "For me it was the speed that I think may have played some small part in bringing the situation back under control."

That such vehicles are now readied for use against political demonstrations makes clear the extraordinarily sharp intensification of class tensions in Britain.

Alongside parading the hardware of repression, the Met is threatening direct curtailment of freedom of speech and assembly. Police conditions under the Public Order Act state that organisers and speakers at both rallies “must ensure that all content displayed and broadcast as part of the assembly” does not include material “likely to stir up racial or religious hatred.”

Harman warned, “For the first time we’ve also imposed conditions relating to the speakers at these protests. These conditions make the organisers responsible for ensuring speakers they invite don’t break the law by using these events as a platform for unlawful extremism or hate speech.” Therefore, “If hate speech is used at the rally, we, the police, will intervene, then and there with the speaker. Our condition places the responsibility on the organiser as well as the speaker to stay within the law.” The BBC reported “Specialist officers, working with prosecutors, will be on standby to take swift decisions to arrest and charge hate speech crimes.

The police statement makes clear that these sweeping powers are aimed principally at pro-Palestinian demonstrators. Harman boasted that police had “arrested and charged people for calling for intifada at protests”. How all-embracing these powers are is confirmed in his statement: “If something is hateful and intimidating we will take action whatever the academic or historical interpretation of those words.”

The previous Conservative government, in seeking to criminalise the huge anti-genocide protests, raised the possibility of banning people from carrying the Palestinian flag and chanting the slogan, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!” At that stage, it was unable to agree such draconian conditions with the Met.

Following the replacement of the hated Tory government with Starmer’s, state repression of the protests has intensified sharply. Harman revealed that police were “in discussions” with the Crown Prosecution Service “to collectively reflect on language that prosecutors have previously advised didn’t meet the threshold for prosecution to see if that position may now change.”

In addition, Harman said the Met would be “using dispersal orders so officers can direct anyone intent on causing trouble to leave central London, and we’re giving officers more search powers and the power to order the removal of face coverings using Section 60 and Section 60AA of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act.”

Nothing is being ruled out, with the deputy commissioner stating, “We will impose further conditions if necessary.”

The pro-Palestinian protest is the primary target of this crackdown, despite Robinson’s far-right demonstrations repeatedly descending into violence. Harman admitted that

at last September’s “Unite the Kingdom” rally, “there was violence in multiple locations when protesters attacked police officers and tried to reach opposing groups.” He added that police still have “more than 50 outstanding and unidentified suspects for offences on that day.”

Saturday’s operation is a directive virtually handwritten in Downing Street. The Met’s statement came within two weeks of Starmer’s April 30 “criminal justice roundtable”. This forum followed the stabbing last month of two Jewish men in Golders Green, London, which Starmer declared was the result of a mass wave of “antisemitism” with those who have protested the Gaza genocide responsible.

Starmer—with the Met Police Commissioner by his side, along with Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood—threatened, “If you stand alongside people who say ‘globalise the intifada’ [the word means rebellion, or uprising], you are calling for terrorism against Jews and people who use that phrase should be prosecuted.”

The government was “looking at further measures we can take on protests, particularly in relation to chants, tos banners and the repeated nature of protests” and a “review of laws on public order and hate crime is set to be handed to ministers within weeks”. According to reports—under the guise of tackling the “cumulative effect” of repeated protests—a proposal is being considered to allow just one pro-Palestinian national demonstration annually in London.

Justifying the repression by falsely portraying pro-Palestinian demonstrations as a threat to Jewish people, Harman declared that since October 2023 the Met had intervened to alter routes for “21 out of the 33 protests”. He asserted that organisers had repeatedly attempted to “assemble near, march past or finish near synagogues.” Many Jewish Londoners “feel intimidated and afraid of these protests,” he claimed.

Even with his premiership threatened by a leadership challenge, Starmer ensured he spent Friday morning at a London police station to review Saturday’s operation, alongside Rowley and Labour’s London Mayor Sadiq Khan.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**