Mass arrests of Palestine Action defenders outside Westminster Magistrates Court

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London Metropolitan Police arrested 152 people outside Westminster Magistrates' Court on Thursday for peacefully protesting the proscription of Palestine Action. Hundreds had gathered for a protest called by Defend Our Juries in support of 1,579 people whose cases were due to be listed for hearing.

Since the Labour government's proscription of Palestine Action one year ago, 3,500 people have been arrested under the Terrorism Act (2000) for holding cardboard signs reading, "I oppose genocide, I support Palestine Action."

Thursday's hearing was postponed to October 26, in part due to the scale of the planned prosecutions, involving approximately 400 court trials.

Tim Crosland from Defend Our Juries described scenes of chaos outside the court as police, unprovoked, charged against the protesters, most of whom were elderly. The *Canary* reported, "When organizers set up a simple step stand to allow poets to share readings and songs for Gaza, police swept in, arresting two people and placing them in painful rear hand-restraints under anti-terror and serious crime provisions. Shortly after, a facilitator was arrested simply for speaking to the crowd without amplification."

Police claimed that most of the arrests on Thursday were for "expressing support for a proscribed organisation". But many were arrested for simply opposing Palestine Action's proscription, and others were arrested after police cordoned off and detained people who had applauded or stood close by without breaking the law in any way.

Defend Our Juries has highlighted several instances in which there was no clear legal basis for arrests. One person was arrested for reading out a poem by former Children's Laureate Michael Rosen.

Another protester, Kathryn Magee, a 39-year-old engineer from Newcastle, explained, "I was sitting peacefully on the floor when I was approached by a police officer who informed me that I was under arrest for Section 12 of the Terrorism Act. I had not expressed any support for Palestine Action, either verbally or by displaying any article."

Section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000 prohibits people from inviting support for a proscribed organisation, and a charge under this section leads to a jury trial and risks up to 14 years' imprisonment.

Sir Jonathan Porritt, former director of Friends of the Earth, a Green Party supporter and longtime adviser to King Charles III, was among those arrested.

Hundreds of other protesters, mainly elderly, sought to declare one by one, "I support Palestine Action and I encourage everyone to do the same. Saving lives is not terrorism." Among these was an 87-year-old woman in a wheelchair.

That same day, Palestine Action co-founder Huda Ammori was granted permission by the Supreme Court to challenge the Home Office's designation of the group as terrorist. The July 2025 ban was enacted by then Home Secretary Yvette Cooper based on the spurious depiction of a protest at Brize Norton RAF base (where a plane was doused with red paint) and at Israeli weapons factories owned by Elbit Systems (where property was damaged) as a threat to UK national security.

In February, the High Court ruled that the government's ban was both disproportionate and unlawful, but the Court of Appeal overturned that decision in June. The Supreme Court has now agreed to hear the final appeal later this year, sometime after the summer break.

Prime Minister Andy Burnham's Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, who retained her post from the

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Starmer government, said the government would "robustly defend" the ban against the appeal. She declared that Palestine Action had carried out and celebrated acts of terrorism and promoted violence, while claiming that Labour's proscription did not affect lawful pro-Palestinian protest—even as the police dragnet and mass arrests continue.

According to Joshua Rozenberg KC, "Huda Ammori appealed on two grounds, though it's not clear from today's announcement what those were. Three justices of the Supreme Court, headed by the deputy president Lord Sales, announced this afternoon that permission to appeal had been granted in relation to ground 1 only and refused on ground 2. There were no further details. Sales sat with Lord Leggatt and Lady Simler."

Rozenberg concluded, "The decision is likely to mean that more than 3,000 protesters will not know until November or December whether they will face prosecution."

According to a report in the *Jewish Chronicle* permission to appeal was granted on the ground that then-Home Secretary Yvette Cooper incorrectly applied her own policy when proscribing the group, but the Justices refused permission on the grounds of freedom of speech and freedom of association.

That being the case, it would mean the Supreme Court would likely focus on a technical administrative-law question of whether the Home Office followed its own proscription policy correctly and would not re-litigate the Court of Appeal's earlier judgment that the ban "struck a fair balance" between free expression/assembly rights and national security.

Ammori has nevertheless welcomed the supreme court's decision, saying: "The proscription of Palestine Action has become a vehicle for a far broader crackdown on expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people. This unprecedented attack on free speech and the right to protest in this country is already having a chilling effect at a time when speaking out about Israel's crimes could not be more urgent."

On July 23, the Court of Appeal also ordered a stay on the unprecedented criminal contempt of court proceedings against senior defence barrister Rajiv Menon KC.

Menon represented Charlotte Head, one of six Palestine Action activists, at Woolwich Crown Court on May 5, who were mostly convicted of criminal damage at an Elbit Systems protest, with one found guilty of violent disorder and grievous bodily harm.

At the trial, jurors were repeatedly instructed by Judge Johnson that in reaching a verdict, they must not consider the genocide in Gaza, Israel's crimes against the Palestinian people or the defendants' political motivations. They were also denied any knowledge of the severe sentences for terrorism the defendants faced if convicted.

After the guilty verdicts, Rajiv Menon KC was accused of contempt of court for stating that the trial judge could not direct the jury to convict the defendants and explaining that they could acquit according to conscience. Contempt proceedings against a senior KC for defending the jury's independence are unprecedented in British legal history and have met with widespread condemnation in the profession.

Much of the campaign to defend Palestine Action is being centred on appeals for Burnham to repudiate the policies of his predecessor Starmer and overturn the ban, despite his retaining Mahmood.

Defend Our Juries writes of an intent to embarrass Burnham and of upping the ante by its supporters courting far more severe sentences. Green Party leader Zack Polanski has added to the chorus of appeals to Burnham, saying it was within his power "to scrap this proscription and end these dystopian scenes for good," while the Socialist Workers Party wrote that "Andy Burnham has an opportunity to turn things around. And repealing the ban would be popular with his voters."

An essential condition for defeating this vicious legal witch-hunt is to reject all attempts to cultivate illusions in Burnham. The widespread disgust and opposition against the government's repressive measures must be mobilised behind a powerful industrial and political movement of the working class against war, austerity and to defeat the historic crackdown on fundamental democratic and legal rights.

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