325 Palestine Action supporters arrested outside London's US embassy as Burnham widens attack on democratic rights

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The Metropolitan Police arrested 325 people outside the US embassy in London on Saturday for opposing the ban on direct action group Palestine Action (PA). The Met said 320 were held for expressing support for a proscribed organisation under the Terrorism Act. It is the largest mass arrest of opponents of the ban since Labour Prime Minister Andy Burnham took office in July.

The arrests came days before the Supreme Court begins hearing an appeal on November 4 by Palestine Action co-founder Huda Ammori against the group's proscription. Burnham's government is fighting to maintain the ban imposed by his Labour predecessor Keir Starmer. Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood, retained in her post by Burnham, has pledged to "robustly defend this appeal."

The protest was organised by Defend Our Juries as part of its Lift the Ban campaign. Hundreds gathered at Nine Elms, south London, holding placards reading, "I oppose genocide, I support Palestine Action." Those arrested for holding the sign are charged under Section 13 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which carries up to six months' imprisonment.

As part of its operation, the Met issued a dispersal order under Section 35 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 for the protest. The order covered a vast tract of the capital, not merely "parts of central London" or the embassy "grounds," as some national media reported. It allowed police to direct anyone to leave the area or face arrest from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m.

The zone took in about 2.3 square miles of central and south-west London, from Hyde Park Corner and Charing Cross to Battersea Power Station—including the entire parliamentary estate, Whitehall (more than a mile from the US embassy) and three major bridges.

Arrests began shortly after 12.30pm, before the protest's advertised 1pm start. Officers removed people one by one, carrying those who refused to walk to police vans on nearby Ponton Road.

Charles Allison, a 75-year-old retired lawyer who had travelled almost 300 miles from Cumbria, was taken away by two officers just before 1pm, after being told he posed a "threat." He told the Press Association, "I fear for our civil liberties, which are being devalued and watered down, even by this new Labour Government."

The day before, the Met warned that anyone planning to attend faced "arrest as part of a robust policing operation." Commander Adam Slonecki, who led the operation, threatened that those coming were "essentially meeting to purposefully commit a crime."

Slonecki widened the dragnet. "I want to be clear – it is not just those who hold up placards who should expect to be arrested," he said. "Anyone officers consider to be playing a key role in organising the event, giving instructions to others and/or providing logistical support will very likely be committing an offence and face enforcement action." He added, "The public would rightly expect us to be proactive" and "not just standby and wait for offences to be committed."

Asked by Novara Media what this meant, a Met spokesperson cited Section 44 of the Serious Crime Act 2007, which "makes it an offence to intentionally encourage or assist an offence." Novara reported that the Met refused to "define the terms we've used in our press release beyond their plain English meanings," stating, "it is for officers to form the reasonable grounds to suspect an offence has taken place."

Defend Our Juries warned that people could even be arrested for bringing water to elderly and disabled protesters. "How can the Met possibly justify arresting people who are not defying the ban themselves, who are simply providing logistical support to the peaceful

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protesters, many of whom are elderly or disabled and in need of support?" a spokesperson asked.

Having first made the holding of a sign a terrorist offence, the police now assert the power to arrest anyone who stewards a protest, passes on instructions or helps a pensioner taking part. Using the Serious Crime Act's catch-all provisions, the entire infrastructure of a peaceful demonstration is treated as complicity in terrorism, with the police deciding who is guilty.

The PA ban has produced repression on a scale without precedent. Defend Our Juries announced during Saturday's arrests that the total for defying the ban had passed 4,000. Home Office figures show 3,867 arrests for suspected terrorist activity in the year to June 2026, of which 94 percent were linked to supporting Palestine Action. In the previous 12 months, before the ban came into force, there were 234.

Under another draconian provision within the Terrorism Act, protesters face far longer sentences than those charged under Section 13. Six Defend Our Juries spokespeople were charged in September 2025 under Section 12, which covers inviting support for a proscribed organisation and carries up to 14 years' imprisonment. Home Office figures show eight charges under the section in the year to June 2026.

Since Burnham took office on July 20, at least 562 opponents of the ban have been arrested: 152 outside Westminster Magistrates' Court on July 30; 83 in Liverpool over the Labour conference weekend, including Massive Attack's Robert Del Naja; two at the National March for Palestine on October 10; and 325 on Saturday. Another 79 were reported for summons in Liverpool, meaning prosecutors may summon them to court by post. Those arrested have been overwhelmingly older people, including 94-year-old human rights barrister Margaret Owen, who was arrested again on Saturday.

Palestine Action was proscribed with effect from July 5, 2025, after activists entered Brize Norton, a Royal Air Force (RAF) base, and damaged two Voyager aircraft in protest at British complicity in the Gaza genocide.

The High Court ruled the proscription unlawful in February 2026. The Court of Appeal overturned that ruling in June, and police resumed mass arrests.

In August, the US government designated Palestine Action a terrorist group. Defend Our Juries chose the US embassy for its latest protest to highlight what it called the "Trumpian" nature of the ban, which it said was always about "appeasing Trump and the Israeli weapons companies that Palestine Action disrupted, not about any kind of terrorist threat."

Burnham and Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband have continued Starmer's support for the Israeli onslaught and his pro-war agenda, despite their crocodile tears. On July 9, shortly before taking office, Burnham declared, "Labour's initial response to the treatment of Gaza caused huge hurt. We got it wrong and I am sorry for that." He has continued the ban on Palestine Action and refused to describe Israel's mass murder of the Palestinians as genocide.

Within 48 hours of taking office, Burnham agreed to continue Starmer's policy allowing US aircraft to fly what the UK calls defensive strikes on Iran from RAF Fairford and Diego Garcia. On September 21, Burnham authorised an RAF Voyager to refuel Saudi fighter jets attacking the Houthis in Yemen. In October, his government announced that RAF Typhoon jets would be sent to Saudi Arabia, along with an A400M transport aircraft, military advisers, and a 90-day extension of air-to-air refuelling.

At the UN General Assembly in September, Burnham announced a National Centre for Information Defence, uniting intelligence agencies, police and social media companies to "detect, attribute and disrupt" hostile information attacks. Presented as a defensive measure against foreign "disinformation", such a body will be turned against dissent at home. Opposition to war, austerity and genocide will be branded the work of hostile powers, just as peaceful opposition to the ban on Palestine Action has been branded terrorism.

Whatever the Supreme Court decides this week, democratic rights cannot be defended by appeals to the courts or to Burnham. The fight to lift the ban, to drop all charges against those arrested and to oppose genocide and war requires the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the Labour government and the capitalist system it defends.

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