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Britain

Defend the right to protest

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The police harassment and disruption of the 18 January Palestine solidarity demonstration in London is evidence of a growing intolerance towards these events, and of a growing threat to criminalise all but the most minimal and ineffective protest movement.

Since the start of Israel's genocidal attack on the people of Gaza in October 2023, there have been twenty-four very large national Palestine solidarity demos in central London. Many hundreds of thousands have marched through the West End and Westminster, on a Saturday afternoon, almost without incident. As one observer noted, the arrest rate at these demos was lower than at the Glastonbury festival.

Nor – despite repeated provocations – have there been any instances of attacks on or damage to synagogues or Jewish property, nor any harassment of individual Jews. Indeed, these demos have been marked by the presence of a large and vibrant Jewish Bloc, bringing together a dozen different Jewish organisations opposing Israeli genocide, including a group of Holocaust survivors and their descendants.

Nevertheless, there have been repeated attempts to portray these marches as characterised, even motivated, by unbridled Jew-hatred. This weaponisation of antisemitism, which worked so well in the campaign against Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, is now being deployed against the Palestine solidarity movement as a whole.

It has been argued, for instance, that the slogan "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" is a call for extermination of Jews in Israel – though for some reason, no outrage is expressed when Israeli expansionists lay claim to the same territory with a similar slogan.

There have been claims that the marches, and the sight of Palestinian flags, of watermelon symbols, and of people wearing keffiyehs, are somehow unsettling, even a threat, to Jews going about their everyday business. And there are attempts to ban boycott and divestment activity, and even to proscribe PSC and to ban demos altogether, as has happened in Germany and France.

Palestine protests face criminalisation

These baseless smears and wild threats are evidence that Israel has lost the propaganda war and completely run out of any half-way plausible justifications for its behaviour, and must therefore work with its political allies in the imperialist states to prevent any expression of the universal revulsion at its continuing genocide. But this will not prevent activists from protesting loudly and visibly.

Yesterday's demo is a case in point. The route, initially agreed with the police, was announced at the previous demo, in November, and people around the country had been making plans to assemble outside the BBC to protest at its one-sided presentation. But, barely a week before the march, it became clear that the police had reneged on the agreement. Citing spurious claims of a threat to worshippers at a "nearby" synagogue, the police informed organisers that the march could no longer assemble near the BBC. The synagogue in question is 500 metres away from the proposed assembly point, in a back street, and in the opposite direction from the proposed route; and the rabbi who made the complaint has given sermons strongly supporting Israel's actions, while criticising the "heavy handed" policing of last summer's far-right rallies.

The police refused to reconsider, despite numerous appeals, including a letter signed by more than 1000 British Jews rejecting the claim that the demonstration would make the area an unsafe place for Jews. The police also refused to meet representatives of the Jewish Bloc or to hear an alternative Jewish view to that presented by Israel's supporters. They also imposed a restriction zone around the BBC, threatening to arrest any protester entering the area – and allegedly did arrest one person doing so. Instead, the police instructed that protesters should assemble in Russell Square before marching to Whitehall.

In response, the organisers stated that the protest would assemble in Whitehall, and then march to the BBC, arriving long after any synagogue service had finished. The police also banned this, insisting that all that would be permitted was a static rally in Whitehall. They subsequently tried to even further restrict the protest. Fortunately Palestine protestors in other parts of the country – notably in Salford and in Norwich – did hold events outside BBC buildings.

Salford Media City 18 Jan Photo Ian Parker

The 'wrong sort of Jews' for the establishment

I was standing with friends at the Jewish Bloc assembly point opposite the Women's War Memorial when a couple of cops threatened to arrest us if we did not move. "You are not permitted to be here. Go down the road to the designated muster area"; to which one organiser retorted "Jews have been ordered before to report to a designated muster area. We're not moving". We didn't, and the cops eventually backed down.

Eventually, after speeches had finished, protesters formed up in Whitehall, with the Jewish Bloc and the Holocaust survivors at the front, and started to walk towards Trafalgar Square. Police formed a line in front of us, but by this time many hundreds of protesters had passed us, and demanded why the police were blocking the Jewish protesters from joining them. Once again, the police backed down, and we were able to march as far as the square, where a massive police presence and rows of police vehicles blocked most exits.

Again, the police told us that if we remained we would be arrested; we could disperse, or return to Whitehall. By this time, there were no stewards and information was lacking. After some consultation, the Jewish Bloc agreed to hold a brief rally in the square, and then to leave. The Holocaust survivors decided to return to Whitehall, but were then told that they would be arrested if they did so.

Members of the Jewish Bloc went for a coffee. When we left the café some time later, we witnessed the arrest of several people – including apparently some Japanese tourists who had been caught in a police kettle at the square.

The Metropolitan Police are now reporting that they arrested 77 people. Most of these were for refusing to leave a police-imposed restricted zone – which in effect means that, had the police not decided to restrict the demonstration, there would have been very few arrests. Any disorder was the result of police decisions, not protesters' actions. But we can be certain that this will be used as a pretext to further restrict, or even ban, future protests.

Unprecedented

One of the biggest concerns must be the arrest of the demonstrations chief steward, Chris Nineham of Stop the War.

Defend the right to protest

According to reliable eye-witnesses about 12 officers piled ontop of him in a violent manner when he was trying to facilitate the laying of flowers in Trafalgar Square to commemorate the dead children of Gaza as had been agreed with police.

Not only was he held for 20 hours in a police cell but has been charged under the Public Order Act effectively with organising an illegal demonstration and placed on bail conditions which prevent him being involved in any further protests at all. Further it has also become clear that both John McDonnell MP and Jeremy Corbyn MP, who not only witnessed the attack on Nineham but posted publicly about it are being interviewed by the Met under caution the next day.

Despite the reactionary nature of the police in general – and of the Met in particular – it is inconceivable that the government itself was not involved in instigating the overall direction of their actions yesterday. The whole movement needs to unite as one to demand the dropping of the charges against Nineham and the other protestors who have been charged – and address that call not only to the Met but to the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the entire government.

Meanwhile, Israel's apologists have now called for similar action to ban demonstrations near another two synagogues, at Marble Arch and Knightsbridge. If put into practice, this would effectively prevent any demonstrations along Park Lane and Knightsbridge/Kensington High Street, two of the main routes of previous demos.

Jewish activists are angry. Angry at the nearly eighty years of Palestinian expulsion and dispossession. Angry at the repression of Palestinians in the Israeli state and the territories it governs beyond the 1948 borders. Angry at the co-option by the Israeli state of historical Jewish suffering in order to justify this genocide. Angry at the unthinking agreement by many that support for Israel is an integral part of Jewish identity and that all Jews support Israel. And angry at the way this false claim is likely to be used in order to further restrict the right to protest.

Never let it be forgotten that the Holocaust was a European crime, committed on European soil by European people. The Palestinian people, who bear no responsibility for this, have been forced to pay the penalty, while Europeans weep crocodile tears and once again put Jews up as the scapegoats for reactionary and oppressive measures that they would have imposed regardless.

Defend the right to protest! Liberate Palestine!

[AntiCapitalist Resistance](#) 19 January

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