

IN OUR MILLIONS

A Netpol report on the policing of protests in Britain against Israeli genocide in Palestine

Executive Summary

The report finds that far from the difficult balancing act British policing insists it faces in maintaining political 'neutrality', police forces (and especially the Metropolitan Police) have been heavily influenced by an increasingly coordinated campaign of public pressure by the media, government ministers and pro-Israeli opponents of Palestine solidarity, demanding the police 'do more' to crack down on allegedly unacceptable protests.

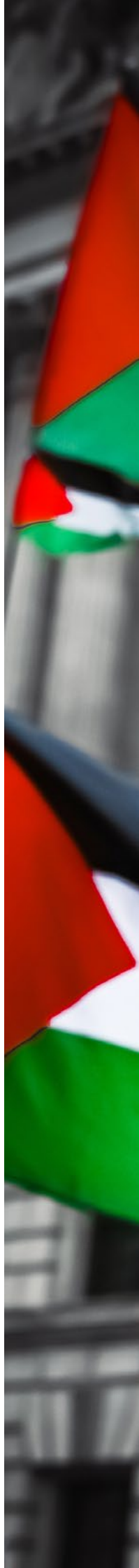
This is consistent with a confrontational approach to public order policing of political demonstrations in Britain that has been criticised before, not least in Netpol's previous work on the climate crisis, Black Lives Matter and 'Kill the Bill' demonstrations since 2019. All were policed in response to similar external pressures, although the use of 'hate crime' as a justification for severely restricting rights to freedom of expression and assembly is unique to the policing of the pro-Palestine movement.


Like earlier demonstrations that included significant participation from members of racialised communities, there is ample evidence supporting the accusation of racist and Islamophobic policing. This was significantly more intense during protests in late 2023. Overall, there has been a pattern of racial profiling at demonstrations that has included not only the targeting of Palestinians or Arabic-speaking protesters but also Black and brown children and young people in a way that has reinforced established patterns of racist policing, especially in London.

Key Findings

Analysis of the Metropolitan Police's own data on "Operation Brocks" published in May 2024 and covering the period 14 Oct 2023 - 31 March 2024 reveals that there have been 305 arrests, but at least 89 of these were far-right demonstrators, arrested at a single event in November 2023. Data shows that police had little evidence to turn arrests into criminal charges. Of the 305 arrested, no further action was taken in 44% (136) of cases. Of these 305 arrests:

- **45 were for racially / religiously aggravated offences, but only 11 people were immediately charged. Almost half were released without charge**
- **15 were for terrorism offences**
- **Despite calls for new powers to tackle mask wearing at protests, the Met's own data states that only 8 people have been arrested for allegedly refusing to remove a face mask; only two of these were charged.**





The testimony, evidence, statistics and media coverage gathered and analysed in this report reveals several worrying trends in the police response. These are:

- A climate since October 2023 where political speech and protest criticising the state of Israel is policed almost entirely as a potential 'hate crime', based on a very strict adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism by the government and by the College of Policing.
- This has included numerous reports of intense harassment, threats of arrest, and protesters detained for chants long associated with Palestinian solidarity protests. Phrases such as "from the river to the sea" are now treated automatically as 'hate speech', as is the use of words like 'intifada' or even simply possession of the Palestinian flag.
- A rigid adoption of restrictions on marches and demonstrations, through advance imposition of section 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act (1986) that is wholly disproportionate to any realistic prospect of serious public disorder, serious damage to property or "serious disruption to the life of the community".
- An unjustified use of Section 35 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act (2014), which gives powers to the police to disperse protesters where there is a likelihood of disorder or anti-social behaviour (harassment, alarm or distress) arising from a gathering. This power appears to have been used in circumstances where this threshold was not reached, and in a way that unacceptably curtailed freedom of assembly.
- The widespread misuse of powers to compel people to remove face coverings under Section 60aa of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994). Our research shows that although many people faced police harassment for wearing face coverings, particularly people from racialised communities, the number of actual arrests was low and almost none resulted in charges. This undermines the case put forward by police for the extension of these powers.
- The use of anti-terrorism measures to target expressions of solidarity with Palestine as markers of radicalisation, particularly targeting racially minoritised protesters. This has included a very broad interpretation of what constitutes "glorifying" proscribed 'terrorist' organisations, often resulting from little more than wearing particular colours or styles of clothing, or displaying writing in Arabic. Many of these arrests for terrorism offences were reactive, and were made following online "doxing" and social media fuelled complaints from political opponents of the demonstrations.
- Individual police officers were given extensive individual discretion to determine whether images or messages amounted to a racially aggravated public order offence. This has led to arbitrary and uneven decision-making by police during protests about how words and images used by protesters on leaflets, placards and banners are interpreted. Laws created to supposedly protect racialised people have been used to criminalise them, in some cases simply for displaying graphic images from Gaza that highlight the reality of the genocide protesters challenging.
- Numerous and alarming cases of aggressive and violent policing both during and after protests. This has included multiple instances of police violence against children and young people, a chilling parallel in a set of demonstrations which has seen large numbers of young people speaking out against the killing of Palestinian children and youth.