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Dear Zoë,

Thank you for your letter dated 29th January 2025, expressing concerns about the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) March on Saturday 18th January. I understand and acknowledge the strong feelings around this matter, particularly in light of the conflict in Gaza and Israel and its impact on London communities.

Since October 2023, events in the Middle East have had an impact in the UK, and in London in particular which is a focal point for protest. We have spoken on a number of occasions at London Assembly sessions about the challenging balance the police must strike in relation to ensuring safe, peaceful protest, and enabling others to go about their lives unimpeded and unharmed.

Over the past 15 months, the Met has policed over 20 'national call out' protests by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, each involving significant numbers of participants coming into the city. In doing so, we have had to carefully consider the safety and wellbeing of local residents, businesses and communities.

In advance of the planned protest on 18th January, the command team worked closely with the organisers to agree a route, through numerous discussions and correspondence. More so with this particular protest than others, it was very difficult to agree with the organisers a route that would not impact the daily lives of others – particularly in seeking to start or end the march in the vicinity of Portland Place. Whilst we worked to agree plans with organisers, our efforts were hampered by the PSC promoting their change in plans without consultation with us. We therefore were required to respond, and to issue conditions that enabled them to process and protest, but also gave consideration to the wider public, transport network, other emergency services and other protest activity that was underway across London that drew additional police resources.

The PSC asked protest participants to gather in Portland Place, outside the BBC, from noon on 18th January, ahead of a march to Whitehall. The Gold Commander imposed conditions to prevent any such gathering in Portland Place and the surrounding area.

He did this having carefully considered the likely impact of the PSC's plans, and as part of those considerations the MPS reflected on the views of local community and business representatives, including those of the congregation at a synagogue located a very short distance from the proposed 'form up' point in Portland Place.

We took into account the cumulative impact of a prolonged period of protest – over 15 months, often taking place on Saturdays and on numerous occasions in the vicinity of synagogues. You will no doubt be aware, as we are, that this has been a cause of increased concern for many Jewish Londoners who have altered their plans, avoided parts of central London and reduced attendance at religious services. As such, on 7th January, the Gold Commander wrote to the PSC to inform them that we have reached the view that a protest forming up so close to a synagogue on a Saturday – the Jewish holy day – when congregants will be attending Shabbat services, risked causing serious disruption. That decision was taken based on a detailed consideration of the evidence, not any outside influence. It is unlikely such stringent conditions would have been put in place if the PSC had not chosen the weekday for Jewish communities' religious observance.

Your conclusion that the use of s12 and s14 was disproportionate is your view. I trust my senior officers who take on the difficult role of being a public order gold commander – possibly the most highly trained, highly tested public order commanders in the world – who make decisions, in the context of London being a seat of considerable volume of protest, major ceremonial and sporting events, with skill, care and professionalism.

The legal framework within which officers operate when considering a policing plan around protest marches is set by Parliament. Under s.12 Public Order Act 1986, conditions may be imposed by police where it is reasonably believed that a march may result in serious disruption to the life of the community – and it is important to emphasise that all planned protest events must be considered on their own merits in line with the framework in s.12 (and s.14 in relation to static protests). The law created by Parliament also requires a balancing exercise of the Convention rights of those participating in the protest under articles 10 (freedom of expression) and 11 (freedom of assembly), and those of communities affected by the protest, in particular rights under article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion).

The policing plan for protests such as Saturday 18th, including the conditions imposed, includes a consideration that people of all faiths in London feel able to manifest their religion and wear articles of faith in public without fear of harassment or intimidation. Since October 2023, the MPS has worked hard to balance the rights of those participating in protest with the rights of communities to feel safe as they go about their business, including practising their religion.

Assemblies or procession routes that are in close proximity to Synagogues on the Sabbath have an increased likelihood of resulting in conditions being imposed to prevent the serious disruption that would result; each protest is considered by the Gold Commander on a case by case basis, including time of day, day of week and location.

Of course, as with every public order event, the team will consider any learning from the 18th January protest and use this in future planning.

On a similar note, you referenced protestors entering Whitehall from Westminster. Whilst we facilitated the rally staging being constructed, we also had to respect and support a large school procession and hence did not allow people to return south out of the condition area due to our responsibilities to protect the article 9, 10 and 11 of the school children and their families. As with many of the planning conversations, there are numerous competing factors at play of which the wider public and the organisers are not aware, but the organisers were fully aware of these wider factors and were talked through the planning of the conditions by the Gold Commander of both wider protest activity in London and the particulars of the large school procession prior to the conditions being imposed.

You asked about liaison with the Home Secretary about this protest. As you know the police are operationally independent. It would not be right for the Home Office or MOPAC to seek to influence the decision making of the Gold Commander, or other senior officers, in making decisions about our policing plan. They did not do that. As is usual, we communicate our plans to our accountability bodies to enable them to ensure wider resources and structures are primed for large scale public order events – but at no point did this, or would this, cross the line into influencing and decision making.

You asked specifically about decision making with regard to releasing the names of those charged. Thirteen people were charged with a range of offences following that Saturday's protest, with a further two persons attending voluntarily at a police station to answer questions. The publication of those charged with offences is entirely in keeping with the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice guidance about publishing names of individuals - it stipulates this specifically: ... "those charged with an offence – including those who receive a summons to court – should be named, unless there is an exceptional and legitimate policing purpose for not doing so or reporting restrictions apply".

The specific detail of events that saw protesters move from Whitehall into Trafalgar Square form part of the investigations that are underway following the protest. It would not be appropriate for me to pre-empt the outcome of those investigations by commenting further at this stage.

But you make a valid point about the level of resource required to police public order events on this scale. On that day, we deployed 43 PSUs – around 1,000 officers – to ensure a safe and peaceful protest. In the last year or so, we have had around 70,000 officer days diverted to dealing with protests. Those 70,000 days were dealing with PSC protests and JSO largely. Many of these officers are being drawn from London's communities, and while we are trying to shift the balance away from disrupting community policing, sometimes, on a scale like this, it is inevitable.



I am grateful for your correspondence; as you can imagine the MPS received a large amount of correspondence in advance of, and after this particular protest – a large amount of it recommending a course of action that the police should take, and sometimes then shared publicly and with the media. Whilst we welcome engagement with communities affected by the marches and we will take into account all relevant evidence of disruption caused when planning our response to protests, it is important to make clear that the police are operationally independent and we are not able – and nor would it be lawful – to factor into our decision-making political lobbying. We also police without fear or favour. I welcome constructive dialogue – and I welcome the challenge in your letter; I hope this response has made our rationale clearer.

I look forward to seeing you at the Police & Crime Committee this week.

**Sir Mark Rowley QPM
Commissioner**