

# **Letter to Commissioner about 18 January 2025 Palestine Solidarity Campaign protest**

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Dear Commissioner,

### **18 January 2025 Palestine Solidarity Campaign protest**

I am writing to you about concerns raised with me by constituents following the way the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) policed the 18 January 2025 Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) protest. This follows concerns I raised with Assistant Commissioner Matt Twist and Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, Kaya Comer-Schwartz at the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee meeting on 29 January 2025.

It has taken time to get this letter to you – the delay has been due to the huge number of emails I received from people sharing their views and experiences of attending the protest and the way the police acted on the day. I have read and responded to each one before sharing their evidence in this letter.

I heard from a wide range of people who attended the demonstration including people of all ages, people as part of the group “Holocaust Survivors and Descendants against the Gaza Genocide” as well as people from inside and outside of London. I also heard from people who had been arrested, or witnessed their friends being arrested.

All of the instances reported to me are very concerning, they undermine people’s right to protest and have caused distress. They also undermine the faith and trust that protesters and Londoners more generally place in the MPS.

### **Feeling misled**

Some constituents told me they felt they were deliberately misled by the MPS officers they interacted with on the day. There are many accounts of the police letting people through into one area then not allowing them back

to Whitehall and thus creating an 'arrest area'.

One person told me that police officers near to Westminster station were letting protesters in but not informing them that it wasn't legal to be in that area. Officers also didn't let protesters go back out towards Westminster once they'd crossed that line, essentially trapping them into the illegal section. The constituent felt the officers were doing this on purpose.

Another constituent told me about how officers from non-MPS constabularies seemed to lack knowledge both about London and the event. They've told me how officers from Durham Constabulary were pushing protesters towards where the counter-protesters were assembling, and after being questioned about this by protesters admitted they didn't know London and didn't know what was going on.

A further constituent told me that when trying to leave the area to go home because they felt unwell, an officer told them 'you'll have to find another way', but there was no other way for them to leave. Being trapped in an area by police, when they felt they hadn't done anything wrong. This is 'kettling' – a containment tactic that is supposed to be a 'last resort' and should only be used 'when proportionate to the threat faced'.<sup>[1]</sup>

Another constituent explained how a second line of officers blocked them moving further down Whitehall and said they were told they could only go through 'if I didn't protest'. When they asked what the police officers meant the constituent explained that the officers 'looked at each other and had no answer'.

### **Rights of protesters**

I am also really concerned about the number of people who were arrested who have said that they were not given any warnings ahead of their arrest. At a recent Police and Crime Committee meeting on Public Order Policing, we heard from Kirsty Brimelow KC, barrister from Doughty Street Chambers who was concerned about the speed of police enforcement on people taking part in public protests.

We were told that since the Covid-19 pandemic and since the introduction of legislation such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act in 2022, and then the Public Order Act in 2023, there has been a move towards much swifter enforcement.<sup>2</sup> Enforcement should be a last resort when people are exercising their legal rights to protest, and I am concerned that in this case the MPS were far too eager to arrest people and made little attempt to de-escalate and avoid arrest.

The police have a duty to facilitate peaceful protest and should take reasonable measures to protect peaceful public processions and assemblies (positive duty).<sup>3</sup>

I have heard that counter-protesters were allowed to gather in Whitehall (the only place the PSC protesters were able to gather), and for a long period shouted and were acting aggressively which escalated tensions. They were eventually escorted out.

Individuals who ended up near Trafalgar Square told me that there was a single digital display sign facing towards Trafalgar flashing out a message in fragments: "PARTICIPANTS IN PSC EVENT/MAY NOT MARCH FROM THIS AREA/CONDITIONS ARE IN FORCE/NON-COMPLIANCE MAY RESULT IN ARREST".

They told me that they doubted that this sign would have been legible or even visible for the majority of the crowd, especially for those who had arrived via Embankment/Charing Cross and had gathered facing the gazebo beneath which the scheduled speakers had assembled. This lack of visibility of the signs and the limited number of signs meant that it's possible that many attendees were not clear about the rules and rights that they were operating under.

## **Disproportionate response**

The overwhelming majority of emails and letters I have received told me that the march was peaceful in nature/intent as well as peaceful on the day. Reports explained how arrests were often for 'petty' reasons. Many arrests are carried out with violence even against older people, women and children.

Constituents also told me about how they felt an extremely hostile atmosphere was created by police forming lines and shouting at people, and that this was not something they had witnessed at any of the prior 20 or so protests they had previously attended.

Others told me how officers acted aggressively around children as young as four. One person told me about how their four-year-old daughter was in tears when they were surrounded by the police. Every time they moved officers would gather and start the aggression again. After making their way out, the parent was so angry, they shouted 'shame on you' at the police and a police officer responded: "Do you want to get arrested in front of your child?"

From the reports I've read – most of the arrests happened after the speeches when people were trying to leave.

People also told me that they were arrested for untrue reasons. For example, people who were arrested for allegedly not leaving the section 14 area or blocking the highway, neither of which they said they did. Or being arrested for having a sign, despite not having a sign.

One constituent reflected that, having read the conditions of the Section 14 Public Order Act, they could not see how when they were quietly walking on their own, they met the criteria of being either a threat, or showing themselves likely to be a public nuisance, creating a serious public order offense, or any of the other various subsections of the Act.

People have also told me that when waiting for friends at Embankment station the police approached and insisted that they moved into Whitehall. In my view and the view of those people who wrote to me, waiting for a friend is not grounds to threaten arrest and is a disproportionate response from the police.

Others had told me about how it appears that the arrestees from the protest were escorted by coach to a police station in Sutton saying this strongly suggested to them that the arrests and subsequent actions were pre-planned by the police, given the coaches were already available before the event to remove large numbers of protesters away.

The police kettle in Trafalgar Square was frequently mentioned by people who contacted me. A summary of what they told me is that:

- There was no information or indication that people couldn't move to Trafalgar Square
  - One person who was arrested described their experience: "I would not have gone into Trafalgar Square if I had known there was this section thing - which no one knows about or understands – happening. My friend remembers she asked a policeman by the National Gallery if we could go in and he said 'yes you can get in there ladies' and this must have been around 4.25-30pm. He could have advised us not to go in and we would have gone straight to window shopping for clothes instead."
- The kettle included people who were likely at the demonstration as well as bystanders who may not have been at the protest.
- There was no coordinated chanting or demonstrating in Trafalgar Square at the time of the kettle.
- The atmosphere after the march was relaxed and calm so they found the big group of policing running into a line disproportionate.

- People describe asking to leave and then being arrested for not leaving.
- One person described how they witnessed children being violently arrested.

The conclusion I have drawn from the provided evidence is that the initial Section 12 and Section 14 notices were not proportionate, given that the focus of the protest was the BBC and the last time PSC had used that route was in February 2024.

I had raised questions ahead of the planned protest on the 18th January regarding the Met's judgment of 'cumulative impact' meaning that the demonstration was not allowed outside the BBC.

I asked if protests haven't occurred recently or consistently at this proposed location near the BBC, then what cumulative impact are the Met taking in to account? The response I received from Pippa Mills, Assistant Commissioner, Met Operations & Performance was: "in addition to having regard to the circumstances in which the event is to be held, the relevant legislation also expressly states that, in considering whether serious disruption may occur, 'relevant cumulative disruption' may be taken into account."

### **Violence**

Many accounts were shared with me of violent arrests including of older people, a pregnant woman, and children.

The police treatment of peaceful protesters, including the violent and unprovoked arrest of Chris Nineham, was entirely unjustifiable and escalated tensions unnecessarily.

### **Treatment after arrest**

One individual contacted me saying that the officer who arrested them conducted a search and placed her headscarf and coat in a plastic bag, leaving her with just a T-shirt. Despite repeated requests, she was not provided with her headscarf, while others in custody had their keffiyeh and coats. This raises significant concerns about the violation of her human rights and possible discrimination.

Other people told me how they were in custody and left without food which meant that they hadn't eaten for more than 20 hours. An arrestee reports that people taken onto coaches weren't provided with even water, and they went without a drink for five and a half hours. A parent who was arrested wasn't allowed to make a call until 10pm when they needed to check their 17-year-old son was being cared for.

A number of people have also raised concerns about the safety risk for people who were arrested having their names and addresses shared publicly.

### **Police narrative post event**

None of the accounts I've seen fit the description from the MPS that protesters 'forced their way through' to Trafalgar Square – this simply isn't true and is evidenced by the firsthand testimonials and video footage. There are many videos and testimonies of the police letting people through and the police themselves referring to what they were doing as a 'filter cordon' to let people through slowly.

For the MPS to misrepresent the circumstances of the crowd movement is deeply worrying and further damages the reputation of the MPS in London and in the wider communities.

Given the MPS aim to rebuild trust with Londoners and will have to navigate more complex and challenging protests, I hope you are able to answer my questions below with full transparency.

### **My questions about the operation on the day:**

1. Who gave the orders to kettle people assembling in Trafalgar Square and under what pretext?
2. Why did the police prevent people from leaving Whitehall via Trafalgar Square when they wanted to and under what pretext?
3. How many police officers were drafted in from other areas? What was the cost of policing the protest on 18th?

**Can you also tell me:**

1. What the evidence basis was for the extra conditions on the demonstration? I have not been able to find a published justification or rationale for these conditions.
2. How the MPS interpreted the Public Order Act, as no 'serious' disruption or risk of disruption could have occurred, considered to be 'more than minor'?
3. What communication you had with the Home Secretary regarding the protest?
4. If you will instruct the MPS to undertake a review of the policing operation including:
  - o the use of section 12 and section 14
  - o how the duty of the MPS to protect peaceful protest ('positive duty') was considered and upheld?
5. When further training will be provided, to both MPS officers and non-MPS officers used for extra support in protests, regarding the 'positive duty'?
6. If the body worn cameras footage of those arrested will be released to the community monitoring groups to review?
7. What consideration did the MPS give to not releasing the names and details of people charged following the protest and would there be any circumstances under which these names and details would not have been released?
8. What steps will be taken to ensure the impartial and fair treatment of protesters in future demonstrations?

The actions of the Metropolitan Police during this demonstration were a gross abuse of power and a clear attempt to intimidate and suppress lawful protest.

I urge you and MOPAC to investigate these incidents thoroughly, hold those responsible accountable, and implement measures to prevent such misconduct in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Zoë Garbett  
Green Party Member of the London Assembly

[1] [Kettling \(1\) \(london.gov.uk\)](#)

[2] [\(Public Pack\)Minutes - Appendix 1 - Public Order Policing - Panel 1 Minutes Supplement for Police and Crime Committee, 09/10/2024 10:00 \(london.gov.uk\)](#)

[3] [Layout 1 \(college.police.uk\)](#)

## **Response from Commissioner**

12 February 2025

Dear Zoë,

Thank you for your letter dated 29<sup>th</sup> January 2025, expressing concerns about the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) March on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 18", 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 18" 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

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