

## EHRC Warns Over Heavy-Handed Policing of Palestine Protests

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Britain's human rights watchdog has raised serious concerns about the policing of recent Palestine-related demonstrations, warning that heavy-handed tactics could undermine fundamental democratic rights.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has written to Home Secretary Yvette Cooper and Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley, stressing that the right to

protest must be respected and that policing must remain proportionate.

In a letter, EHRC chairwoman Baroness Kishwer Falkner emphasised that peaceful protest is “a cornerstone of any healthy democracy”. She warned that blanket approaches to policing demonstrations risk creating a chilling effect, discouraging citizens from exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

“Any interference with protest rights must be lawful and assessed case-by-case,” she said. “Heavy-handed policing or blanket approaches risk deterring citizens from exercising their fundamental rights through fear of possible consequences.”

The EHRC highlighted that public confidence in the UK’s human rights protections could be eroded if peaceful protestors fear disproportionate police action.

The watchdog also drew attention to reports of police engaging with individuals whose protests were not linked to any proscribed organisations. One case involved a woman in Canterbury, Kent, who was reportedly threatened with arrest under the Terrorism Act for holding a Palestinian flag and signs reading “Free Gaza” and “Israel is committing genocide.”

The woman denied any connection with banned organisations and is now taking legal action against Kent Police. The force confirmed it had received correspondence from her legal representatives regarding the incident on 14 July 2025.

Baroness Falkner said officers must receive clear guidance on their human rights obligations to ensure an appropriate balance between public safety and civil liberties.

The protests have taken place in the context of the government’s decision to proscribe Palestine Action under the Terrorism Act 2000. The group was banned in July, with ministers contending it was responsible for acts of violence, criminal damage and serious injury.

Under the ban, supporting or showing affiliation with Palestine Action is now a criminal offence punishable by up to 14 years in prison. Last weekend, over 500 people were arrested in London for demonstrating support for the group, bringing the total number of arrests since the ban to more than 700.

Downing Street described Palestine Action as a violent organisation. The group rejected the description, calling the claims “false and defamatory”.

Asked to respond to the EHRC's concerns, the Home Office referred to Ms Cooper's earlier statement. She insisted that while the right to protest is protected, "this is very different from displaying support for this one specific and narrow, proscribed organisation."

The Metropolitan Police declined to comment on the EHRC letter.

During demonstrations on 9 August, in Parliament Square, more than 500 protesters were arrested. The total number of detentions reached 532, of whom 521 were held for expressing support for the proscribed group.

Authorities estimate the policing operation cost around £3 million.

The Crown Prosecution Service has confirmed that charges are being brought against dozens of individuals accused of breaching terrorism laws during the demonstrations.

Director of Public Prosecutions Stephen Parkinson said: "The public has a democratic right to protest peacefully in this country. However, Palestine Action is now a proscribed terrorist organisation and those who have chosen to break the law will be subject to criminal proceedings."

He warned that convictions could carry serious consequences, including restrictions on travel and employment. "People should be clear about the real-life consequences for anyone choosing to support Palestine Action," he added.

The situation highlights a growing tension between maintaining public order and safeguarding human rights. While the government insists that the proscription of Palestine Action is necessary for national security, the EHRC has stressed that protest rights must not be undermined in the process.

Baroness Falkner concluded that maintaining public confidence requires a careful balance. "This concern extends beyond those directly affected by police engagement to the broader health of our democracy," she said.

As prosecutions progress and further demonstrations are expected, the debate over the boundaries of lawful protest and the scope of police powers is likely to remain central to public discourse.