Priti Patel backs police investigation of LSE protest against Israeli ambassador

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/10/priti-patel-lse-protest-israeli-ambassador-tzipi-hotovely-police-investigation>

Priti Patel, the UK home secretary, has given support to a police investigation of protests outside the London School of Economics on Tuesday night that led to the Israeli ambassador being led away at speed with heavy police protection after addressing a meeting with students.

A large group of protesters gathered outside the building at which [Tzipi Hotovely](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/20/outrage-as-hardliner-tzipi-hotovely-is-chosen-as-next-israeli-ambassador-to-uk) spoke. Video from the scene showed security guards rushing Hotovely, who was clutching a bouquet of flowers, into a vehicle, while others tried to fend off a group of jeering and booing activists, who chanted, “Shame on you!” At least one protester tried to rush towards her.

[Patel tweeted](https://twitter.com/pritipatel/status/1458385024957521922) that she was “disgusted” by the treatment of the Israeli ambassador, and that antisemitism had no place in Britain, adding that she would continue to do everything possible “to keep the Jewish community safe from intimidation, harassment and abuse”. She said she had been in touch with the ambassador and that the police had her full support in investigating the matter.

Hotovely said afterwards: “We will not give in to thuggery and violence. The state of [Israel](https://www.theguardian.com/world/israel) will send its representatives to every stage.”

Sharing the video, the education secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, said it was “deeply disturbing”, adding that he was “so sorry” to Hotovely.

The Middle East minister, James Cleverly, said: “We value open debate and peaceful protest. The aggressive and threatening behaviour directed at Israeli ambassador Hotovely last night was unacceptable.”

All sides accept that Hotovely was able to make her case to a room full of students for 90 minutes, and there is video of her answering questions in an orderly way.

The protests outside specifically targeted Hotovely, saying she had “advocated for settler colonialism, engaged in Islamophobic rhetoric and has perpetuated anti-Palestinian racism”.

Israel’s diplomatic practice allows for a small number of ambassadors not to hail from the professional diplomatic corps, and she is a former close political ally of the previous Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, previously acting as his deputy foreign minister.

There had been speculation that the newly elected coalition government might seek to replace her as UK ambassador, but instead she was given a firm pledge of support.

On Thursday, the LSE debating society **was due to** host Husam Zomlot, the head of the Palestinian mission to the UK, but he cancelled in the wake of the Hotovely incident, the debating society said.

“We received a phone call from the Palestinian mission where the ambassador asked us to reschedule since he ‘wishes to return to his alma matter [The LSE] when there is a healthier environment [for him to speak],” the society said in a statement. “We wish to emphasise that this was not a decision made by the LSE, LSE Students Union or the LSE SU Debate Society.”

The Israeli embassy issued a statement saying of Hotovely’s event: “It was a successful, open and fruitful discussion that went ahead as planned. Outside the venue, there was a demonstration organised by Palestinian and Islamic societies across London universities. British police maintained order at the scene.

“The violence we witnessed when the ambassador left the premises after the talk will not deter Israeli diplomats from engaging in meaningful dialogue with all parts of British society.”

The LSE said: “Intimidation or threats of violence are completely unacceptable,” adding it would be reviewing its processes around such events. But it added: “The event, which attracted some protest outside, lasted approximately 90 minutes, with the ambassador speaking, taking questions from the audience and leaving on schedule.

“Free speech and freedom of expression underpins everything we do at LSE. Students, staff and visitors are strongly encouraged to discuss and debate the most pressing issues around the world, but this must be in a mutually respectful manner. Intimidation or threats of violence are completely unacceptable.”