



# Stifling Dissent: Approaches to Pro-Palestinian Activism in Schools

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**A Report by Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)**

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## **Abbreviations**

The Department for Education (**DfE**)

The European Convention on Human Rights (**ECHR**)

The Equality Act 2010 (**EA**)

The Human Rights Act 1998 (**HRA**)

Islamophobia Response Unit (**IRU**)

Israel Defense Forces (**IDF**)

Muslim Engagement and Development (**MEND**)

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (**OHCHR**)

## Introduction and Background

Palestinians have suffered decades of abuse and uncertainty at the hands of the Israeli State, which has consistently ignored numerous UN resolutions declaring that Israel continues to breach international law.

Following rising tensions and escalating violence across Israel and Occupied Palestine throughout April 2021, the Israeli Government's actions to evict Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem (land internationally recognised to be Palestinian territory under Israeli occupation) poignantly highlighted the oppression faced by Palestinians in what has been [described](#) as part of a "long campaign to erase the Palestinian presence in Jerusalem". This led spokespeople from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to [conclude](#) that the evictions could constitute a potential "war crime" and that "forced evictions are a key factor in creating a coercive environment that may lead to forcible transfer, which is prohibited by the Fourth Geneva Convention and is a grave breach of the Convention." Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch [observed](#) that discriminatory practices engrained within the treatment and rights of Palestinian and Jewish residents of East Jerusalem "underscores the reality of apartheid that Palestinians in East Jerusalem face".

This led to violence on the 6<sup>th</sup> May 2021 when members of the far-right political party Otzma Yehudit reportedly set up tables opposite Palestinian street iftars in Sheikh Jarrah as a deliberate act of provocation, harassment, and [intimidation](#). Israeli police responded with the widespread spraying of Palestinian homes, culturally significant institutions, shops, and businesses with Skunk, a malodorous weapon used by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which leaves an intolerable stench, as well as causing nausea, stomach pain, and skin irritation, and for which Israel has previously been heavily [criticised](#) for its excessive use as a form of collective punishment.

The following day, on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021, hundreds of worshippers in Masjid Al-Aqsa were injured in an attack by Israeli forces armed with rubber bullets, stun grenades, and tear gas, while they performed night prayers as part of their Ramadan worship. Hundreds more Palestinians would be injured in violence throughout the following days, including in three subsequent stormings of Masjid Al-Aqsa by Israeli police. During these attacks, the Palestinian Red Crescent [reported](#) that Israeli forces blocked medical aid from reaching injured Palestinians inside the mosque, observing that "blocking medical rescue teams from reaching the wounded is a blatant violation of international humanitarian law, which requires the occupying force to facilitate the mission of medics and provide healthcare to the sick and injured."

On the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> May 2021, Hamas fired rockets into Israel while Israeli forces launched military airstrikes on Gaza, [resulting](#) in the killings of 260 Palestinians in Gaza, including at least 66 children, and twelve civilians, including two children, in Israel.

The violence, human rights violations, and continued abuse directed at the Palestinian people subsequently evoked widespread emotional and political solidarity across the UK, including amongst large swathes of young adults wishing to engage with democratic processes to promote social justice and accountability on behalf of the oppressed.

However, in just a matter of days, MEND's Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU) received hundreds of reports from students and parents across the UK highlighting the approach of many schools in curtailing or prohibiting expressions of Palestinian solidarity and shutting down debate rather than engaging in a civil and respectful dialogue about the current situation in Occupied Palestine. Amongst the reports are accounts of students being verbally (and in some cases physically) reprimanded, and receiving detentions, suspensions, exclusions, or even experiencing police involvement for expressing support for the Palestinian cause. The forms of activism reported as most likely to be punished were the wearing of Palestinian flags, emblems, or the keffiyeh (32%) and expressing vocal support for Palestine (23%).

Meanwhile, there were also numerous wider [reports](#) of concerted efforts by schools to demonise Palestinian solidarity, including a headteacher stating that the Palestinian flag is a "message of support for antisemitism" and another report of a school banning students from distributing "free Palestine" stickers, with students caught doing this being labelled by the headteacher as "cowards and racists".

Meanwhile, the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, [wrote](#) to headteachers of all state secondary schools in the UK on the issue of discussing Palestine and Israel in a school setting, and made particular mention to cases where Jewish students/teachers had been made victim to anti-Semitic sentiment – something against which caution should be taken and which useful advice is found in MEND's guide on facilitating discussions on Palestine [here](#). However, Williamson made no mention of Islamophobia faced by Muslim students in relation to the issue of Palestine and failed to express any kind of concern for Muslim children who face such prejudice. In the context of current tensions, this failure to treat both groups with equal concern can only serve to encourage prejudicial treatment against Muslims and creates an environment where their legitimate democratic expression is uncritically labelled as racist.

It further emerged that PREVENT teams sent guidance to a number of schools across the country detailing how to approach discussions on Palestine, renewing concerns that the PREVENT strategy is being used to shut down political opposition through securitising legitimate discourse. This is a hugely dangerous approach as it creates a chilling effect on Muslim students' abilities to participate in democratic expression, thus producing severe consequences for democracy and for any attempts to nurture students into mature and active citizens.

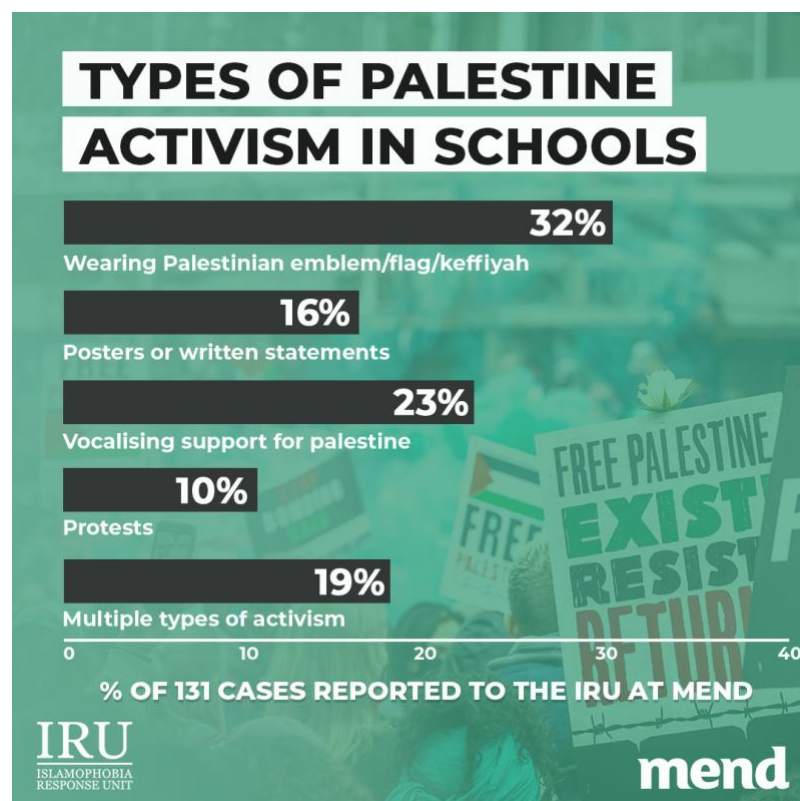
These instances raise severe concerns about the systematic exclusion of Muslim students from legitimate expressions of democratic engagement and represents a striking example of structural and institutional forms of Islamophobia embedded within our education system. As such, this report aims to provide an overview of the cases that have been dealt with by IRU as well as an exploration of some of the salient issues inherent with the apparent approaches of many schools regarding expressions of Palestinian solidarity.

## Summary of Findings

- MEND's IRU handled 157 cases, of which 131 are considered within the remit of this report.
- The large majority of cases were in relation to secondary schools and sixth forms, however, there was also a number of reports from primary schools and universities.
- The majority of the 157 cases received by IRU were reported by students themselves, however, the IRU also received complaints from parents as well as teachers.
- The reports received by IRU were almost exclusively from Muslims. All cases, including those that were not reported by Muslims, related to instances involving Muslim students.

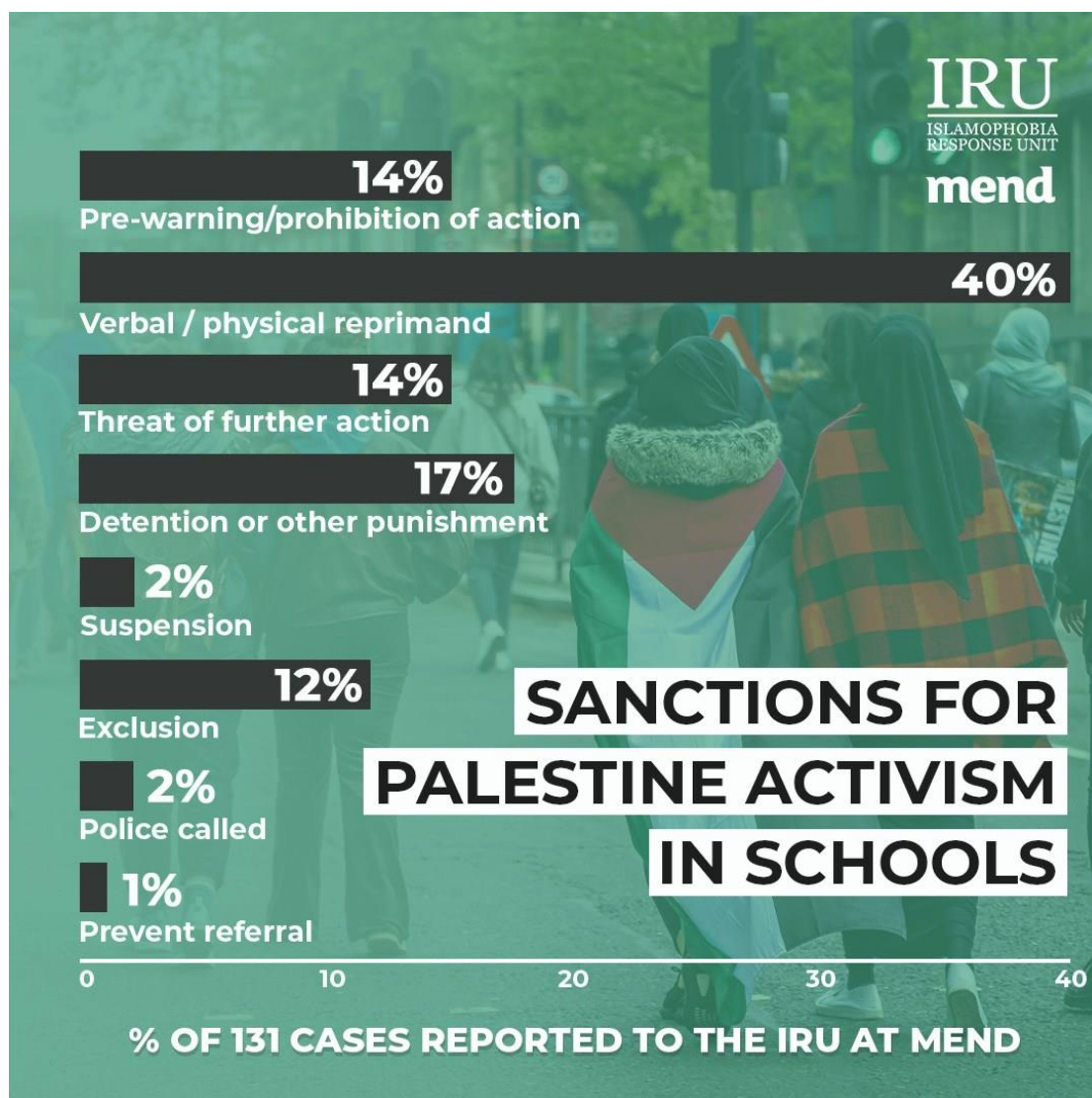
## Types of activism

- Amongst the types of activism reported to us as having incurring action by schools, the largest category was wearing Palestinian emblems, such as the Palestinian flag, keffiyeh, and badges (32%).
- This was followed by verbal support of Palestine (23%), displaying posters or written support (16%), and protests (10%).
- 19% of cases included multiple forms of activism.



## Types of sanctions

- 40% of the cases reported to the IRU, the largest proportion, were in relation to verbal and physical warnings.
- This was followed by detentions or other punishments (17%).
- Pre-warnings/prohibition of action and threats of further action accounted for 14% of cases each.
- Exclusions featured in 12% of cases.
- 2% included police being called and 1% involved a PREVENT referral.



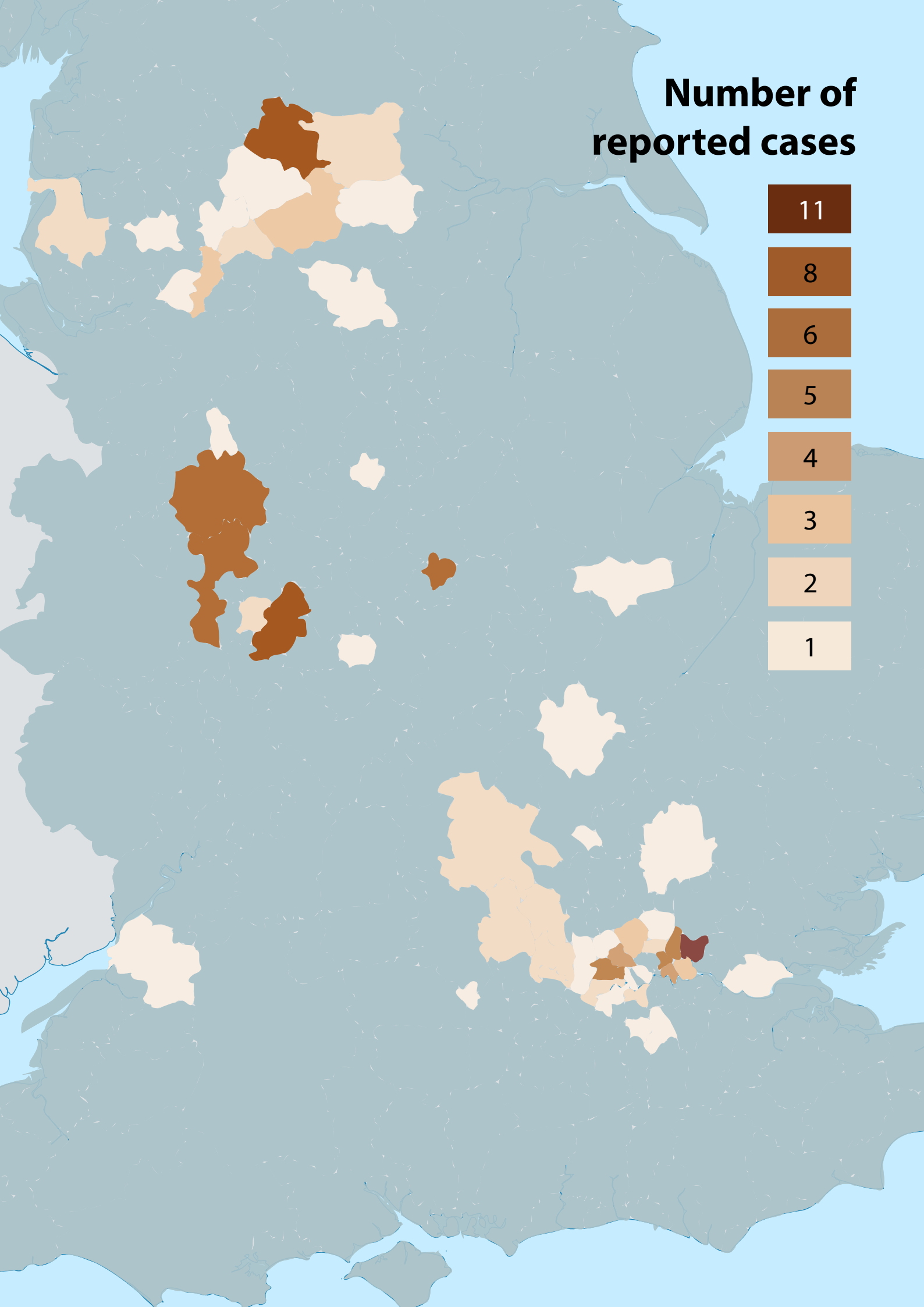
## Geographical locations

- Of the 131 cases in this report, 118 include information about the identity of the school sufficient to determine the responsible local authority.

Of all local authorities, the largest number of reports came from schools in Redbridge (11), followed by Birmingham and Bradford (8 each), and Leicester (6).

Ranking	Local authority	No. of reports	Ranking	Local authority	No. of reports
1	Redbridge	11	8	Bedford	1
2	Birmingham	8	8	Bolton	1
2	Bradford	8	8	Calderdale	1
2	Staffordshire	8	8	Coventry	1
3	Leicester	6	8	Croydon	1
4	Ealing	5	8	Derby	1
4	Hackney	5	8	Enfield	1
4	Waltham Forest	5	8	Gloucestershire	1
5	Brent	4	8	Hammersmith and Fulham	1
5	Tower Hamlets	4	8	Harrow	1
6	Barnet	3	8	Hertfordshire	1
6	Blackburn with Darwen	3	8	Hillingdon	1
6	Kirklees	3	8	Luton	1
6	Manchester	3	8	Peterborough	1
6	Newham	3	8	Reading	1
7	Buckinghamshire	2	8	Rochdale	1
7	Haringey	2	8	Sheffield	1
7	Hounslow	2	8	Stoke-on-Trent	1
7	Lancashire	2	8	Sutton	1
7	Leeds	2	8	Thurrock	1
7	Oldham	2	8	Trafford	1
7	Sandwell	2	8	Wakefield	1
7	Slough	2	8	Westminster	1
7	Wandsworth	2			

# Number of reported cases



## Thematic Case Analysis

The following is a brief exploration of some of the cases reported to IRU. Many of the cases fit into multiple thematic categories. As such, the below is but a demonstrative overview of the types of activities and sanctions that have been witnessed.

### Accusations of anti-Semitism

- A student was excluded for saying "Free Palestine" which was argued by the school to be anti-Semitic and has been classified on his school record as "racist abuse".
- Students at a school in London were told that displaying Palestinian flags was anti-Semitic and were excluded for sharing a video of teachers taking down pro-Palestinian posters.
- Students at a school in London were accused of being anti-Semitic and handed 90-minute detentions for saying "Free Palestine".

### Exclusions

- A student was excluded for wearing a "Free Palestine" sticker on her lanyard.
- Students at a secondary school in Bradford were excluded for wearing a Palestinian flag in school.
- A student at a secondary school in Bedford was permanently excluded for organising a protest and putting up posters in support of Palestine.
- A student was excluded for wearing a "Free Palestine" hoodie and bringing a Palestinian flag into school. They were told that it makes some people feel uncomfortable and threatened.

### Protests

- Students at a secondary school in Kingsbury, London, had organised a protest in support of Palestine with the permission of the school's headteacher. The students were sent home for health and safety reasons and later excluded for 4 days.
- Sixteen students at a secondary school in Leicester were excluded for holding a protest in support of Palestine on school grounds despite having permission from teachers.

### Perceptions of exceptionalism and unequal treatment

- Students reported being given detentions for saying "Free Palestine" and exclusions for putting up pro-Palestine posters, meanwhile the school allegedly supported other students displaying pro-Israel posters.

- A student was permanently excluded for putting up pro-Palestinian posters. The school had previously allowed BLM posters and held presentations on the topic. However, they argued that Palestine was a political matter and that the school shouldn't be involved.
- A school in Slough told students that they could not raise money for humanitarian causes in Palestine but could raise money for Israel.
- Students at a school in London were told that they cannot wear pro-Palestine stickers on their clothes because it's a political situation. However, during the general election, students were allowed to wear badges celebrating political parties.

### Referrals to PREVENT

- A student at a secondary school in Ilford was encouraged by his teacher to give a passionate speech on Palestine as part of his GCSE English Language assessment. After delivering the speech, his teacher made a referral to PREVENT. The student was taken out of a class to be interviewed by a member of the school's senior leadership team without notifying the student's parents of any concerns.

### Bullying, abusive, discriminatory, or Islamophobic attitudes displayed by staff

- A student was told that they can't say "Free Palestine" and that it is Palestine's fault that they are being bombed.
- Students at a secondary school in Halifax were filmed during a peaceful protest in support of Palestine. The school informed the students who participated in the protest that the recording of the protest will be sent to their prospective sixth forms and colleges so that they would be blacklisted from being offered places at the institutions.
- A 14year old student was slapped by his deputy head teacher for holding a sign saying "PLM [Palestinian Lives Matter], FREE PALESTINE". The incident left the student feeling unsafe to return to school following the half term break due to the school's failure to investigate the incident, despite CCTV footage.
- A student from a secondary school in Birmingham put up a "Free Palestine" poster. A teacher at the school pulled down the poster and ripped it up in front of the student. The student looked shocked, to which the teacher replied: "I ripped it, and what?"
- A variety of cases included incidents where teachers have made statements including that it is Palestine's fault that they are being bombed; that Palestine does not matter; and, even using Islamophobic language and slurs (such as P\*\*i).
- Students were told that displaying the Palestinian flag equates to supporting terrorism, with one teacher comparing it to the swastika.

- A student was shouted at by their head of year and told that they support terrorists for having a Palestinian flag painted on their hand.
- In one report from a school in Huddersfield, a student was called a terrorist by a teacher and the headteacher threatened to lower the students' grades.
- One case concerns teachers telling students to wash the Palestinian flag off of their hands, comparing it to support of a "terrorist organisation". A teacher also told a student to put away their "bomb device", in reference to their electronic tasbeeh counter, and informed students that their wearing of hijabs makes her feel uncomfortable.

### Blanket bans on pro-Palestinian support

- A deputy headteacher in Birmingham was reported to have told students that they would be expelled if they were found with Palestinian flags, posters, or drawings and that they weren't allowed to stand for Palestinian rights or raise awareness. Students were told that the teachers would be watching over them. The next day, the head of year searched students' bags for Palestine related items. According to a student, "this made me feel victimised and embarrassed."
- The headteacher of a secondary school told Year 9 students that she does not want to see Palestinian flags in the school as it reminds her of terrorism.
- The headteacher of a school in Redbridge banned flags and wearing clothes which were the same colour as the flag as it was, for her, a representation of Hamas which scares people.

### Questioning and warnings

- A student from a school in Derby drew "Free Palestine" on her hand and wore a "Free Palestine" t-shirt. The student was asked to meet with the headteacher who told her that she would not be in the school much longer if she carried on expressing support for Palestine.
- A five-year-old student at a primary school was taken out of class and questioned for 45 minutes after speaking about Palestine at breaktime in the playground.
- A student from a school in Leytonstone was stopped by a teacher because she had a "Free Palestine" sticker on her jumper. The teacher removed the sticker from her jumper and took her phone before attempting to look through it. The teacher also asked the student to go to the headteacher's office as she was at risk of being suspended.
- A secondary school in Sheffield banned the use of protests, posters, or even saying "Free Palestine".

## Bullying by other students

- A 12-year-old student at a secondary school in Nottingham was bullied by two classmates for expressing support for Palestine. The classmates called him an ISIS member and “P\*\*i”. When the parents of the bullied student made a complaint to the school, the school issued a PREVENT referral against the student and the classmates faced no repercussions.

## Understanding discrimination

Legal protections against discrimination are [embodied](#) in the Equality Act 2010, which “protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society.” Specifically, it protects against discrimination on the basis of nine ‘protected characteristics’, including discrimination based on religion or belief. Many of cases presented to IRU amount to either direct or indirect forms of discrimination.

**Direct discrimination** occurs if you believe that you have received worse treatment compared to other people because you possess a protected characteristic (for example, you have been treated badly because you are Muslim). In order for a case of direct discrimination to be made, you must be able to demonstrate that your treatment has been unfair when compared to someone else who has been treated better in similar circumstances. For example, if you can show that students of other faiths have been allowed to advocate for Israel in the same way for which the student in question has been reprimanded, or, you must be able to demonstrate that a person without your protected characteristic would have been treated better in similar circumstances. For example, if the school’s policy has not been consistent when compared to how it may have dealt with non-Muslim students surrounding Extinction Rebellion activism.

**Indirect discrimination** occurs when a policy is implemented that seemingly applies equally to everyone, but which disadvantages people who share a protected characteristic compared to those who do not. It does not matter if the intention of the policy was never to disadvantage a specific group; it is sufficient that it can be proved that disadvantage has occurred. For example, it may be possible to demonstrate that a school’s blanket policy on prohibiting expressions of Palestinian solidarity indirectly discriminates against Muslim students because Muslims are overwhelmingly supportive of the Palestinian cause and therefore the policy disproportionately impacts these students.

However, when it comes to general debates about freedom of speech and promoting the active citizenship of young people, many of the cases reported to IRU represent a failure of schools to uphold their **Public Sector Equality Duty**. Under Section 149 of the Equality Act, schools must have due regard of the need to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

This includes encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low. Numerous studies have documented ways in which the Islamophobia that Muslims frequently face undermines their ability to engage in public life on an equal footing with their non-Muslim counterparts, with findings of the Social Mobility Commission, [demonstrating](#) that Islamophobia holds back young Muslims at every stage of their life.

As such, there is an argument to be made that schools should be actively encouraging and nurturing Muslim students specifically to be fully engaged and active in public and political debates. Therefore, purposefully prohibiting expressions of Palestinian solidarity (a cause in which Muslims in particular tend to feel very emotionally and morally invested) explicitly goes against this aim by preventing these students from

being fully active in public life on an equal footing with their non-Muslim counterparts.

## Understanding rights to expression

The right to protest is a fundamental principle of a functioning democratic society. Consequently, students have a right to expression that is protected by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and the Human Rights Act, 1998 (HRA).

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 13 and 14 protects a child's right to freedom of expression and freedom of thought, belief, and religion. Threats of exclusions, sanctions, or reprimands for pupils wishing to exercise their right to protest or a failure to allow said protest would thus contravene this convention.

Similarly, the ECHR and the HRA (which allows ECHR cases to be heard in UK courts) protects the right to freedom of expression (Article 10) and freedom of assembly (Article 11) whilst also protecting against discrimination in accessing these rights (Article 14).

- **Article 10 Freedom of expression:** Article 10 protects the right to hold opinions and express your views as an individual or collective, even if they may be unpopular or disturbing, without interference from the state or public authority.
- **Article 11 Freedom of assembly and association:** Article 11 protects the right to association such as trade unions, political parties, or any other association or voluntary group, as well as the right to assembly, including peaceful protests.
- **Article 14 Protection from discrimination:** Protection from discrimination means everyone has equal entitlement to the rights embodied by the HRA and the ECHR without discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, religion, sexuality, disability, or age. As outlined in the Equality Act, discrimination can either manifest as direct discrimination or indirect discrimination (see above).

It is important to note that there is no requirement for protests to be authorised or well behaved for it to be protected. Rather, "rights worth having are unruly things. Demonstrations and protests are liable to be a nuisance. They are liable to be inconvenient and tiresome, or at least perceived as such by other who are out of sympathy with them."<sup>1</sup> In other words, protests and demonstrations are likely to cause inconveniences, but the right to freedom of expression and association are so important that they outweigh the inconvenience caused.

The state (and by extension public bodies, such as schools) has an obligation to ensure that the rights contained in the ECHR and the Human Rights Act are "practical and effective and not theoretical and illusory."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the state must actively work to facilitate and encourage these rights, including the right to protest, and not just tolerate them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tabernacle v Secretary of State for Defence* [2009] EWCv Civ 23

<sup>2</sup> *Delcourt v Belgium* [1970] ECHR 1

MEND's guidance on how schools can create a respectful environment and facilitate discussions about Palestine can be found [here](#).

## Creating a respectful environment and facilitating discussions about Palestine

Many students will wish to discuss the situation in Palestine and Israel, which may include expressing their views on the conflict and their solidarity with a given side. Democracy involves differences of opinion, and it is fundamental that schools are able to discuss contentious issues. This gives an opportunity for misconceptions to be clarified and exposes pupils to contrasting points of view.

There are many examples of good practice for schools to follow, and it is our hope that schools would identify a 'champion' for the discussion of contentious issues to identify best practice and provide guidance. We draw attention to the Council for Europe's (2015) guidance on [Teaching Controversial Issues](#), and the Association for Citizenship Teaching's (2015) guidance on the [Prevent Duty and Teaching Controversial Issues](#). Topics need to be approached in a way that allows the expression of legitimate differences of opinion so that a topic can be fully explored in a setting that is supportive for all children.

While anti-Semitic language and behaviour must be confronted and should not be tolerated, the mere advocating for the human rights of Palestinians or criticising the actions of the Israeli Government cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic. The shutting down of these expressions of opinion sends a false and discriminatory message that they are anti-Semitic and, therefore, the students involved are themselves somehow racist.

Misguided and inaccurate statements have been made by some senior school officials equating Palestinian activism with terrorism and violent behaviour. In at least one example reported to us, the Palestinian flag was even described as a "call to arms". Again, supporting the human rights and freedom of Palestinians is in no way an indication of violent intent but is a symbol within democratic engagement and debate. As such, the implicit labelling of students who care deeply about human rights and justice as violent or equating them with terrorism is a disservice to their genuine desire to make the world a better place. At the same time, due to the securitised lens through which Muslim students are often seen, these students are especially sensitive to the perceived threat that measures under PREVENT will be used against them.

As well as this, in some of the cases received by IRU, there have been incidents where teachers have made problematic statements. Some concerning statements include stating that it is Palestine's fault that they were being bombed; that Palestine does not matter; and, even using Islamophobic language and slurs (such as P\*\*i). Such divisive and prejudicial language should be resolutely condemned and challenged at all levels. Schools need to be equipped to recognise unacceptable and prejudicial behaviour and statements from staff members, as well as the potential consequences of such attitudes.

### Facilitating healthy expressions

Small expressions of solidarity can be very beneficial to students' own sense of self and agency. Examples of activities that can encourage positive mechanisms of expression include:

- Wearing a pin badge, keffiyahs, or wristbands.

- Allowing the display of the Palestinian flag.
- Encouraging artwork, poetry, or other creative activities that facilitate student expressions of solidarity.
- Fundraising for humanitarian aid charities working in the region, and which are chosen in collaboration with the students.
- Schools may wish to consider implementing a suggestion box for students to raise their own ideas for approved activities.

Conversely, a prohibition of such expressions can be counter-productive, leading to escalation of behaviours rightly of concern to a school (such as graffiti or anti-social behaviour). Such restrictions also severely damage the trust that students have in their school and teachers. They compound a sense of frustration and helplessness that will necessarily impact their wider engagement with the school, and therefore their relationship with education and wider society as a result. This is why we believe that facilitated discussions and expressions are not only beneficial to all parties, but are vital to establish and maintain the trust required for a flourishing school community.

### Facilitated discussions

Many students have become frustrated about the lack of progress to resolve the situation in Palestine and would benefit from an organised and supported opportunity to discuss their concerns. As this is a highly emotive topic, things to consider are:

- **Discussion style:** These discussions are often more suited to smaller groups as they provide greater opportunities for individual engagement. Large assemblies and large group settings do not always allow students to say everything that they would like and are more difficult to chair and fairly manage. It is useful to consider the format of the discussions:
  - **Open forum:** A general open discussion can be guided by pre-prepared open questions for discussion and allows for students to freely express their own opinions. However, they also run the risk of students feeling intimidated if they are of the minority viewpoint. Students should be encouraged to understand the positions of those with whom they initially might disagree.
  - **Organised debate:** An organised debate may be preferable as it encourages students to consider viewpoints that contradict their own. Students should be separated into opposing groups by numbers and without reference to their individual perspectives (i.e., some students will find themselves arguing for a position that they don't necessarily agree with). At the same time, it is helpful to identify a specific and targeted question that avoids a broad analysis of a conflict that is far too wide to attempt to analyse in a short debate. In this way, students can be given the opportunity to thoroughly research the issues and present a case with greater reflection. At the same time, it avoids the risks found in an open forum where students from a minority viewpoint may feel intimidated or inhibited from participating. The format may be thought to involve a significant amount of time and

preparation, but we think it might be considered as part of a school's general approach to citizenship education.

- **Ways to facilitate discussions:** It is important that staff, guest speakers, and/or senior pupils facilitating these discussions allow space for students to express themselves without judgement, regardless of their own political viewpoints. Their own viewpoints may be used to stimulate debate, but this should only be done with a view to legitimate the expression of different views, rather than to uphold one view against others. This does not mean ignoring or allowing hateful, Islamophobic, or anti-Semitic rhetoric. It is for this reason that it is important to introduce the overall discussion with an exploration of ground rules and terminology (as discussed below).
- **Encouraging participation:** Students may feel uncomfortable contributing, particularly if they are in the minority and if the discussion is very passionate. However, facilitators should also be aware of wider sensitivities that impact their students and which may impact their ability to participate fully:
  - **Muslim students:** Muslim students have been shown to be inhibited from contributing to classroom discussions due to the chilling effect of the PREVENT strategy and fears that political engagement will be interpreted as a sign of extremism. As [highlighted](#) by Rights Watch UK, “the Prevent strategy is leaving a generation of young Britons fearful of exercising their rights to freedom of expression and belief”. Considering the wide-ranging evidence of PREVENT's disproportionate focus on Muslims, students from Muslim backgrounds will likely need particular reassurance that their contributions are valid and welcome. The wider issue of PREVENT in classroom discussions about Palestine will be discussed further below.

At the same time, Muslim students are likely to also experience Islamophobia, particularly around the issue of Palestine, with accusations that support of Palestine is tantamount to support of terrorism or anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, with Palestinians being majority Muslim and continuing to live under what the UN describes as illegal occupation whilst being deprived of all physical, political, social, and cultural freedom, many Muslim students may feel frustrated and a sense of helplessness in these discussions. This feeling of helplessness can only be compounded if students feel that they are likely to experience negative consequences and judgement for standing against such injustice.

- **Jewish students:** Jewish students frequently suffer anti-Semitism in relation to Israel and assumptions that they support or are in some way responsible for the actions of the Israeli Government. Furthermore, Jewish students may also experience accusations of Islamophobia on account of the conflict. As such, it is important to have conversations with students about the terminologies outlined below and highlighting the need to be mindful of how language and assumptions may impact fellow students.

A useful practice at the beginning of any discussion is to acknowledge the emotive quality of the conflict and reassure students that feeling frustration at injustices is to be expected. It is important that students are made to feel at the outset that their views will be respected without judgement.

It is also helpful to consider techniques for managing the discussion to ensure that all students have the time and space to express themselves, for example having timed speaking allocations or assigning a speaker order list.

### Understanding terminology and describing opposing parties

One of the great difficulties in discussions surrounding Palestine is the risk of falling into Islamophobic or anti-Semitic rhetoric. When creating the safe environment outlined above, it is helpful to introduce students to the below concepts and explain the limits of the discussion around these terms. If attempting this exercise before an organised discussion, it is advisable to reserve considerable time as it is essential in delineating legitimate political discourse and ensuring that all students are mindful of the risks of inadvertently reverting to hateful words and behaviour.

- **Israel does not represent all Jews:** in fact, many Jews ardently oppose the Israeli Government's treatment of Palestinian populations.
- **Hamas does not represent all Palestinians:** Again, many Palestinians do not support Hamas, and everyday Palestinians have no power to control their actions.
- **A Jewish vs Muslim conflict:** Stress that this is not a religious conflict – it is about rights to the land and representation. Reducing the conflict to one of hatred between Muslims and Jews is unhelpful and divisive as it obscures the political and historical context of the conflict.
- **The Israeli Government:** In avoiding discussions surrounding Jewish communities, we advise practitioners to concentrate discussions around the actions of the *Israeli Government*. Critical analysis of any government is a legitimate part of democratic debate and removes the risk of assigning blame to communities.

### Avoiding the language of security

We are aware that schools are required to promote 'fundamental British values'. We believe that it would be beneficial if schools were to shift the term 'British' from being a description of the values – an adjective – to a noun describing a place. In other words, emphasis might be on fundamental values that facilitate living together in Britain. In this way, the traditions – religious, cultural – of pupils from different ethnic and minority religious backgrounds might be used as a resource for understanding and interpreting those values. For example, during the Covid 19 pandemic, many religious communities have provided support for others within their localities.

However, it has come to our attention that PREVENT teams across the country have sent guidance to a number of schools. We are concerned that this may result in framing the issue of Palestine within the lens of security and counter-terror. This is a hugely

dangerous approach with severe consequences for democracy and for any attempts to nurture students into mature and active citizens.

While this report does not provide space to fully discuss the problematic nature of PREVENT and its discriminatory impact upon Muslim students specifically, it is helpful to explore Rights Watch UK's report [Preventing Education? Human Rights and UK Counter-Terrorism Policy in Schools](#) and MEND's [Evidence to the Independent Review of PREVENT](#).

One of the key criticisms of PREVENT is the chilling effect that it has on the political engagement of Muslim students. Therefore, it is important that teachers and staff are mindful of their Public Sector Equality Duty to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not, and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. This necessarily involves encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low. As such, it is essential that schools actively support their Muslim students in expressing their views by creating an environment where they feel safe and supported enough to do so.

An understanding of the potentially devastating consequences for students if schools uncritically subsume the issue of Palestine within the apparatus of PREVENT can be found in the case study of Rahmaan who was referred to PREVENT for handing out leaflets highlighting the water shortage and humanitarian aid crisis in Gaza when he was in year 10 (read about Rahmaan's case in pages 35-40 of the Rights Watch UK [report](#)). In reflecting on his experiences and a friend who had similar experiences, Rahmaan [described](#) his friend as someone who "has completely withdrawn from politics. He turned from, [someone] in year 10... [who] was a very proud Palestinian supporter, [someone who would] always go out on rallies and demos and always hand out pamphlets, and now, because of Prevent, he...[has become] really quiet and submissive and withdrawn from society. And if you look at all those people that have gone to ISIS, it's because they have been withdrawn from society that they found these different societies on the Internet." If schools are to nurture active citizenship amongst their students, it is imperative that they heed the lessons from such cases.

### **Understanding 'non-partisanship'**

The Department for Education (DfE) has signalled to schools that they should utilise organisations to support discussion around Palestine/Israel which are 'non-partisan.' This is problematic because supporting the right of the Palestinian people should not be caveated with a need to support the nation occupying their land. Furthermore, accurately highlighting the disproportionate impact of the conflict on the Palestinians (including the death toll) does not equate to non-partisanship. Indeed, in pursuit of non-partisanship to compromise on accuracy is flawed and in itself demonstrates bias against Palestine and Palestinians which undermines non-partisanship. This position is further troubling because some of the organisations which have been proposed by DfE and PREVENT teams are themselves partisan in their support for Israel. As but one example, the Secretary of State for Education has suggested schools use *Solutions Not Sides*. However, an insightful piece in the Middle East Eye [highlights](#) that this organisation is far from 'non-partisan' and should be avoided by schools as reliance upon such organisations can only ever produce an inherently pro-Israeli bias.

Instead, schools should be looking to impart accurate information to their students, including information about breaches in human rights and [international law](#) that have been committed by Israel and which have been observed by the [UN](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#).

Concerns of bias have also been raised about recent comments of the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson. Williamson wrote to headteachers of all state secondary schools in the UK on the issue of discussing Palestine and Israel in a school setting, and made particular mention to cases where Jewish students/teachers had been made victim to anti-Semitic sentiment – something against which caution should be taken and which useful advice is found further above. However, many have expressed concern that despite widespread and growing Islamophobia across recent years and also in relation to the issue of Palestine specifically, Williamson has failed to express any kind of concern for Muslim children who face such prejudice. In the context of current tensions, this failure to treat both groups with equal concern can only be seen as in direct opposition to his suggestion that schools, students, and staff remain politically neutral.

In reality, true political neutrality can only involve allowing all factions to express their views in a democratic manner whilst protecting all concerns from abuse and hateful rhetoric. In their mission to nurture healthy and engaged citizens, it is this path that we urge schools to follow.

## Recommendations

### Parents and students

As a starting point, it is important to think about the situation you are faced with and the objectives that you wish to achieve:

1. If there has been some kind of discriminatory reprimand that will be on a student's permanent record, the main objective will usually be to have this expunged from their record. This is important to ensure that it does not impact their future educational opportunities and experiences.
2. Even if there has been no formal note on their record, the aim should be to ensure that the student has not been dealt with unfairly. Therefore, the focus should be on overturning or rectifying any action taken by the school that is deemed to be discriminatory and to ensure that the student faces no further ongoing victimisation.
3. A secondary objective may be to ensure that expressing solidarity for Palestinians (as long as it is done in a civil and respectful manner) is not prohibited by schools or equated with racist, extremist, or otherwise unacceptable behaviour. However, the above two objectives should be the main focus with this wider objective being reserved for if these have already been met. The welfare of the student in question must remain the ultimate priority and you should be mindful of the potential long-term impacts of a continuing complaint on the student's mental health and relationship with their education.

While every case is different, MEND's [guide](#) on addressing school action may be of use. While this guide cannot cover every situation that you may be faced with, we hope it is a useful resource for communities in advocating for their rights.

**For further assistance, please contact MEND's IRU at [www.iru.mend.org.uk/](http://www.iru.mend.org.uk/)**

### Schools

With the welfare of students being any school's natural priority, creating a respectful environment for discussions on Palestine and understanding how unhealthy expressions or prohibitions against expression can detrimentally impact student's development should be a primary concern. In addition to the advice laid out in this report, MEND has produced our schools' guidance [here](#).

Other beneficial policies include:

- Developing training programmes for teachers focussed on tackling and addressing bullying based on race, religion, disability, or sexuality. Such training must include increasing the confidence and willingness of teachers to enforce policies and procedures and report incidences to the appropriate authorities when dealing with such cases.

- Prioritising PSE/ PSRE/ PSHE within schools and enlisting grassroots Muslim organisations to assist in developing teaching materials to educate young people on the dangers of Islamophobia.
- Tackling the production and reinforcement of unconscious bias through educational syllabi by investigating the presentation of minority groups in teaching materials across all subjects and implementing awareness training for all teachers in conjunction with representative grassroots organisations.

**If you or your school have any questions or would benefit from any further resources or guidance, please do not hesitate to contact MEND at <https://www.mend.org.uk>**

## Government

Of particular importance in addressing the chilling of Muslim voices within political debate is the tackling of a climate of Islamophobia that interferes with Muslims' abilities to actively engage in public and political debate on an equal footing with their non-Muslim counterparts. To that end, immediate attention needs to be paid to legislative changes, Government initiatives, and community empowerment. Including but not limited to:

- **Counter-terror legislation:** The Government must commit to independently reviewing all counter-terrorism legislation enacted since 2000 with a view to curbing the encroachment of counter-terrorism policies on civil liberties.
- **Media and broadcasting:** There needs to be an emphasis on promoting positive and normalised images of Muslims within media and broadcasting. It is also essential that support is given to educative and industry initiatives designed to attract Muslim and BAME individuals into the spheres of journalism and broadcasting. At the same time, policymakers must commit to the full implementation of the Royal Charter on press regulation and the commencement of the second part of the Leveson Inquiry, including an investigation into the prevalence of Islamophobia within the media.
- **Public exclusion:** Public figures must show greater maturity and responsibility when discussing sensitive debates, not only regarding Palestine, but also including issues such as immigration, security, and integration to name but a few. Such figures must take care not to cause hysteria for the sake of political popularity and agendas (as is often the case with immigration debates for example) or to disregard the experiences of individual communities, as demonstrated by Gavin Williamson's recent letter to schools.
- **Community empowerment:** Emphasis needs to be given to educational programs aimed at empowering minority communities to be actively engaged within politics and media, including initiatives designed to attract Muslims and BAME individuals into the spheres of politics, civil service, media, and broadcasting.



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