

# **The UK government is complicit in Israel's genocide of Palestinians. Our job is to speak out and teach the truth**

**Mandy Turner**

I am speaking from the UK, the country that was the first to repress the Palestinians' right to self-determination and that incubated Israel as a Zionist state.

The basic role of academics is to speak and teach the truth, to have the strength to do this, to support our students who are doing so, and to listen to what our Palestinian colleagues are telling us. Objectivity is not the same as neutrality: we can be objective in our analyses, but we must then take a stand based on the evidence. This is what jury trials do. The truth is that the British government is complicit in Israel's genocide in Gaza. We need to say this loudly and clearly. Collectively, we can find the strength to do so through our trade unions, through our organisations, and through our actions. If we are tenured and in a position of academic privilege, we can also challenge our institutions individually.

Our Palestinian colleagues are calling for a ceasefire. We must focus on that. They have also been calling Israel a settler-colonial, apartheid state for decades. For over 15 years they have been calling for support for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. In my view, these calls are a good guide to what we should also be advocating for.

In the UK, we face a major problem: the government has always supported Zionism and Israel against Palestinian-Arab self-determination. However, we are witnessing a fundamental shift in public opinion, particularly amongst people under the age of 30, and this trend has accelerated since October 7. As the split between the political elites and the general public is widening, we are witnessing unprecedented levels of censorship in response. Such censorship extends to both the government and senior management in various sectors of UK society, including the university sector. Students and academics are resisting and promoting BDS on campuses through direct action, union motions, and campaigning on the streets.

I want to highlight what has been happening to those who are resisting and trying to speak the truth. The UK government is cracking down on their efforts through several means. Over the past few years, it has introduced a number of laws and principles intended to criminalise and intimidate supporters of Palestinian rights, which are now being employed in full force.

In 2016, the UK was the first government to endorse the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism—which has been widely criticised for conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism—and subsequently insisted that all British institutions adopt it. 75% of British universities have adopted the definition, many after being told to do so or face funding cuts. My last employer, the University of Manchester, adopted it without consulting staff, students, or our local branch of the University and College Union. The IHRA working definition is not law, but it is being relied on in university disciplinary procedures, which in turn has had a chilling effect on people's willingness to speak out. The IHRA was also used as a reference point for an investigation into antisemitism within the National Union of Students. The report was released in November 2022 and it was damning.

In addition, there is the anti-boycott bill, which bars public institutions, such as local authorities and universities, from introducing boycotts or divestments. This legislation was passed by the House of Commons on January 10, 2024, amid the bombardment of Gaza. These measures have enabled pro-Israel groups—such as UK Lawyers for Israel—to intimidate individuals and organisations critical of Israel and supportive of Palestinian rights.

The weaponisation of the charge of antisemitism has reached unprecedented levels in the UK, just as it has in the United States.

We are, however, also seeing a fundamental clash between the political elites and growing numbers of the British public. There have been 12 large demonstrations held in London, the biggest of which took place on November 11, when 800,000 people marched for a ceasefire and for Palestinian rights, providing evidence that there is movement at the broader level. Opinion polls are revealing the same thing: three-quarters of the public support a ceasefire in Gaza, a figure that remains constant. There has been growth in membership of Palestine solidarity groups. Support for BDS is likewise increasing.

Many initiatives are being taken by students and academics, as well as in other workplaces. In the university sector, such actions have led to clashes between senior management, and students and staff. Though we have not yet seen the same type of mobilisation that has taken place in recent days in the United States, momentum is building. Students have set up occupations on university grounds and demanded actions from university management, including the divestment of university funds from companies that benefit from Israel's occupation of Palestinian land. In addition, Palestine Action has led direct action activities, mostly targeted at Israeli arms companies with bases in the UK.

In response to all this we are witnessing suspensions, investigations, arrests, and detentions of students and staff for pro-Palestine actions. Some have been arrested and are being charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In more than one case, students were arrested after being reported to the police by their own university's management. Overseas students have had their student visas revoked by the Home Office.

These acts are often not reported on because of the potential harm it could cause to the legal cases being brought. Nevertheless, they are happening, as we know from the large amount of reporting to the European Legal Support Center and the British Society for Middle East Studies. Both organisations are doing amazing work, as are the Friends of Birzeit University and the British Palestinian Committee, among others. They are lobbying parliament for a change in UK policy, along with the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP), a coalition of UK lawyers.

Because of these developments, I feel the tide is turning. Legal cases are being launched against universities for their investment policies. The ICJP has taken a case against Trinity College at the University of Cambridge for its investments in companies that are potentially complicit in Israel's war crimes. There are many other examples of similar actions.

UK academics and students are active in support of Palestinian rights. They are campaigning for a ceasefire, for BDS, and for freedom of speech on campus, and their numbers are increasing every day. All of this action is important because it pushes back against an oppressive government and sends a signal to university management that we will not allow them to erode our freedom of speech, and we will not stand by and allow them to continue to profit from Israel's oppression of Palestinians.

However, I think that things will get worse before they get better. A new generation of students and academics are learning a sad, yet important, lesson: that the institutions in which they work, study, and pursue leisure are mostly run by management staff who will not take a stand on issues likely to provoke government anger. They want a quiet life, and are resorting to all sorts of excuses not to hold events relating to the situation in Israel and Palestine. "It's a security issue" is one; "it's a complex issue" is another.

For this reason, we must keep speaking out for our Palestinian colleagues, and for their freedom of speech and their right to live in freedom and dignity.