



## **Subject: Concerns Regarding the Ongoing Situation in Palestine and Israel in Relation to Muslim Students and Teachers**

Dear Headteacher and respective Members of the School Governing Body,

We are writing to you as concerned members of the community, deeply troubled by the ongoing situation in Palestine and Israel. The humanitarian crisis and escalating violence in the Middle East is causing a great deal of mental stress and upset here at home. Specifically, many Muslim students and teachers within schools are growing increasingly upset.

It is crucial to recognise that numerous Muslim students and teachers have relatives and friends living in Palestine who are tragically enduring the harsh realities of the ongoing violence. As the situation becomes increasingly hostile, it is our collective responsibility to acknowledge that the emotional impact extends beyond geographical boundaries. Many Muslim students and teachers may be deeply affected, and this has the potential to create a challenging environment for them within our schools.

We also recognise that the current social, cultural, and political climate has created an atmosphere where many Muslim students and teachers may feel stifled when it comes to openly discussing the ongoing situation in Palestine and Israel. The fear of being labelled as extremist or referred to the Prevent strategy can lead to mental stress and unease among our Muslim community members. It is essential to address these concerns and emphasise that honest, respectful discussions on global issues are not only an educational right but also a means to foster critical thinking and empathy.

Furthermore, history has shown that during such periods of heightened tension in the Middle East, hatred, prejudice, and even violence against Muslims spiked in the UK. According to Home Office statistics, Islamophobic hate crimes have consistently ranked as the highest form of religious hate crime in the UK for many years, with 39% of all religiously motivated hate crimes (3,452 offences) targeting Muslims from March 2022 to March 2023, despite Muslims constituting no more than 6.5% of the overall population. This alarming trend underlines the need for schools to be aware of and responsive to the concerns and emotions of Muslim students and teachers during this challenging time.

The purpose of this letter is not to advocate for a particular political stance but to emphasise the importance of providing pastoral care and support for our Muslim students and teachers, who may be experiencing heightened emotions and uneasiness due to the ongoing situation. We understand that the Department for Education (DfE) has issued directives to schools not to engage in political activities. However, given the nature of the current crisis, discussions among students and teachers regarding the situation will be inevitable. In this context, we offer the following suggestions to ensure that schools can create a safe and supportive environment for all students:

**1. Fostering a Respectful Atmosphere:** Schools should encourage a respectful atmosphere where students can freely express their views and engage in discussions about the ongoing situation in Palestine and Israel. It is essential to promote democratic values by encouraging diverse opinions and allowing misunderstandings to be clarified.

**2. Encouraging Positive Expressions:** Small expressions of solidarity, such as wearing pins or displaying flags, can empower students and facilitate healthy discussions. Artistic activities and fundraising for humanitarian aid charities related to Palestine provide creative outlets for students to express their support. These acts of solidarity with an oppressed people should not be conflated with antisemitism.

**3. Facilitating Informed Discussions:** To promote informed discussions about the Palestine-Israel situation, schools can organise structured debates or open forums. It's important to encourage an understanding of differing viewpoints and create a safe space for students to express themselves respectfully.

**4. Understanding and Addressing Sensitivities:** Recognising the sensitivities of both Muslim and Jewish students is crucial. Muslim students may hesitate to participate due to the chilling effects of the PREVENT strategy, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian hate, while Jewish students may experience misconceptions about their faith and antisemitism. Educators should ensure a supportive environment for all students to express their views without fear of prejudice.

**5. Upholding Non-Partisanship and Accuracy:** Schools should provide accurate information to students about the Palestinian-Israeli situation, addressing human rights violations and breaches of international law. Avoiding biased organisations and focusing on imparting objective knowledge is essential to maintaining non-partisanship.

**6. Encouraging Democratic Engagement:** True political neutrality involves allowing all perspectives to be heard while safeguarding against abusive rhetoric. Schools should encourage healthy democratic engagement, nurturing active and informed citizens.

In line with the above, we urge schools to adopt and maintain a zero-tolerance policy towards Islamophobia. It is imperative that we stand united against any form of discrimination or prejudice, particularly during a time when emotions are running high. Our Muslim students and teachers must feel protected and valued within the school community.

This zero-tolerance approach should extend to all facets of school life, including but not limited to classroom discussions, extracurricular activities, and interactions in common areas. Discriminatory behaviour, whether subtle or overt, should have no place within a school's ethos. Staff should be vigilant in recognising and addressing Islamophobic incidents promptly, ensuring that Muslim students and teachers can express their views and engage in discussions without fear of bias, discrimination, or prejudice.

We believe that fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity is not just a moral imperative but a foundational element of quality education. By adhering to a zero-tolerance policy against Islamophobia, schools can serve as beacons of tolerance, understanding, and unity, ensuring that all students and teachers, regardless of their background or beliefs, can thrive and contribute positively to the school community.

Lastly, it is essential to understand that talking about or mentioning human rights violations by Israel as a state against the Palestinians is not in any way antisemitic. We do not condone contentious or confrontational discourse regarding Palestine and Israel. Our aim is to foster a compassionate, respectful, and supportive environment for all members of our school community, recognising the emotional challenges that this ongoing crisis may bring.

We appreciate your understanding and attention to these matters. Together, we can create a safe and inclusive environment for all our students and teachers during these challenging times.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

MEND Board