

Interactions *Between* *The UK* and Palestine

January, 2026



Introduction

The following monthly interactions report for January 2026 provides a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of Palestinian rights campaigns and advocacy in the United Kingdom. This report aims to offer readers a clear understanding of the status of the Palestinian issue and the advocacy movement in the UK as of January 2026. The information presented is crucial for NGOs, iNGOs, interest groups, private individuals, and all other relevant stakeholders engaged with matters concerning Palestine and the UK, providing essential insights.

Government

- On 5 January, Communities Secretary Steve Reed warned local councils that they could face legal action and be forced to pay damages for boycotting Israeli businesses. Citing the Procurement Act 2023 and 2016 government guidance, Reed asserted that local authorities should 'stay out of foreign conflicts' and focus on delivering services, despite several Labour-run councils recently voting to divest from companies linked to Israeli military operations or the occupation.

This move marks a significant shift for the Labour Party, which previously opposed Conservative-led efforts to ban public body boycotts while in opposition. The warning comes amid a wider crackdown on pro-Palestine activism in the UK, including the proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation and new police directives to arrest individuals for using specific slogans like 'globalise the intifada'.



- On 11 January, Middle East Minister Hamish Falconer admitted that the relationship between the British and Israeli governments had become 'fractious', describing the tension as a 'source of real pain'. Speaking at the Jewish Labour Movement conference, he attributed the diplomatic strain to policy differences regarding Gaza and West Bank settlements but stated it was 'too early' to resume trade talks, suggesting that future negotiations might depend on the outcome of the next Israeli election.
- On 13 January, it was revealed that a planned visit to Bristol Brunel Academy by Jewish Labour MP and vice-chair of Labour Friends of Israel, Damien Egan, had been cancelled following a coordinated campaign by pro-Palestine activists. The academy called off the event after the local National Education Union (NEU) staff group and parents raised concerns that his presence would 'inflame' teachers, a move the Bristol NEU celebrated as a 'win for safeguarding' due to Egan's support for Israel. Communities Secretary Steve Reed denounced the cancellation as an 'absolute outrage', leading to a snap Ofsted inspection and a pledge from Prime Minister Keir Starmer to hold those responsible to account.
- On 13 January, Jonathan Hall KC, the UK's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, delivered a keynote speech at a Policy Exchange seminar titled 'The Lessons of Bondi Beach'. Hall argued that Israelis are being used as a 'vehicle for hatred of Jews' and called for police to be held accountable for failing to enforce the Public Order Act 1986 against the targeting of Israeli citizens. He warned that neglecting anti- Israeli hatred provides 'wriggle room' for antisemitism and pointed to a 'palpable' national security risk when public order is prioritised over the law during protests.

- The remarks drew swift condemnation from the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP) and Professor David Feldman, who accused Hall of a 'problematic' conflation of antisemitism with anti-Zionism. Critics argued that Hall's approach risks erasing the voices of anti-Zionist Jews and unfairly targets pro-Palestine demonstrations. However, Hall maintained that the demonisation of any nationality, including Israelis, is illegitimate in a tolerant society, specifically questioning the policing failures surrounding the recent ban on Maccabi Tel Aviv fans in Birmingham.

On 14 January, it was confirmed that a 26-year-old Palestinian citizen of Israel, known as Hasan, had been granted asylum in the UK, marking a landmark legal precedent. Judges concluded that he faced 'well-founded concerns of persecution' for his political activism and for describing Israel as an 'apartheid regime'. While the Home Office had initially accepted his claim in early 2024, the process was stalled by political intervention from the previous Home Secretary, who sought to revoke the decision following media scrutiny.

- The final confirmation of Hasan's refugee status followed the Court of Appeal's refusal to allow the government further challenges to the ruling. Documents revealed that caseworkers expected Hasan would face 'arbitrary arrest' and 'discriminatory administrative processes' if returned to Israel. Hasan, who is believed to be the first Palestinian with an Israeli passport to receive such status in the UK, stated that the victory was a result of 'speaking truth to power' despite the years of hardship endured during the legal battle.

- On 15 January, Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper welcomed the commitment to move to Phase 2 of the peace plan, following the announcement of the Palestinian National Committee for the Administration of Gaza. Emphasising that Gaza's future must be 'Palestinian-led', Cooper urged all parties to deliver on their obligations under President Trump's 20 Point Peace Plan to sustain the ceasefire and address humanitarian conditions. She reiterated the UK's support for transitional measures that uphold Palestinian sovereignty and self-determination as a pathway toward a permanent two-state solution.
- On 22 January, Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper confirmed that the UK would not join Donald Trump's 'Board of Peace' at the World Economic Forum in Davos. While expressing support for the US president's 20-point peace plan for the Middle East, Cooper stated that Britain would not sign the legal treaty at this stage due to concerns over its broad scope and the involvement of Vladimir Putin, given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The board, which aims to oversee the Gaza ceasefire and reconstruction, has already seen 35 countries sign on, including Israel, the UAE, and Hungary. However, the UK intends to discuss a 'different supportive role' with its allies rather than joining the current group of signatories.



Parliamentarians, Political Parties, and Semi-official Bodies

- On 5 January, the Palestinian mission in Hammersmith was officially inaugurated as a full embassy, marking a 'historic' transition following the UK's formal recognition of Palestinian statehood the previous September. Ambassador Husam Zomlot described the establishment of the embassy as a 'monumental moment' for a people denied self-determination for over a century, asserting that it serves as 'proof that our identity cannot be denied'. The inauguration, attended by the marshal of the diplomatic corps, signifies a step change in bilateral relations, granting the mission full diplomatic status and privileges based on the 1967 borders.



- On 12 January, it was reported that the Open University had agreed to stop using the term 'Ancient Palestine' in its course materials following a legal complaint from UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI). The dispute arose over an introductory humanities course that described the Virgin Mary as being born in 'Ancient Palestine', which the group UKLFI argued was historically inaccurate and contributed to the erasure of Jewish historical identity.

The university acknowledged that the terminology is now 'problematic' and committed to adding clarifying notes to existing content while removing the phrase from future materials. Professor Adrienne Scullion, head of the faculty, clarified that the term was originally drawn from academic research without political intent, while UKLFI welcomed the change as an essential step for historical accuracy in a sensitive, politicised context.

- On 21 January, a delegation of 38 Israeli school leaders visited Parliament to discuss the integration of artificial intelligence in education. Hosted by Mark Sewards MP, the exchange focused on practical, classroom-led innovation and how AI can be used to reduce teacher workloads while supporting vulnerable students. Organised by Nivi Feldman and led by ORT Israel's Dr Sharon Greenberg, the visit aimed to strengthen UK-Israel educational ties.



- On 24 January, the Metropolitan Police arrested 86 people for aggravated trespass during a demonstration at HMP Wormwood Scrubs in west London. The protest was held in support of Umer Khalid, a 22-year-old Palestine Action activist on remand who has recently escalated his hunger strike to a 'thirst strike' by refusing water. While police claimed the group breached the grounds, blocked staff access, and threatened officers, campaign groups like Prisoners for Palestine described the police response as 'violently disproportionate' and maintained that the demonstration was peaceful.

Khalid, who has a rare genetic condition, is the last remaining participant in a rolling hunger strike by Palestine Action detainees. His protest follows the UK's proscription of the group as a terrorist organisation and seeks to pressure the government over its ties to Israeli military operations. The Ministry of Justice described the escalation at the prison as 'completely unacceptable'.

NGOs – Solidarity groups

- On 6 January, prominent pro-Israel columnist Melanie Phillips faced intense condemnation for dismissing the new Palestinian embassy as a 'non-embassy for a non-state' and suggesting its opening was an act of 'shameful connivance' with a Palestinian 'final solution'. Critics, including historian William Dalrymple, have denounced the remarks as 'unhinged' and racist for denying the existence of the Palestinian people. The backlash highlighted the sharp divide between those viewing the embassy as a 'historic milestone' for self-determination and those, like Phillips, who claim Jews hold the 'only entitlement' to the land.
- On 10 January, the Medical Practitioner Tribunal Service dismissed a long-running misconduct case against prominent surgeon and University of Glasgow rector Ghassan Abu Sittah, following complaints by UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI). The tribunal found that Abu Sittah's writings and social media activity - including references to 'revolutionary violence' and the anniversary of Hamas - were not antisemitic nor supportive of terrorism, concluding that an 'ordinary reader' would not view them as providing aid to proscribed groups. Abu Sittah, who provided medical care in Gaza during the genocide, condemned the two-year investigation as a 'lawfare' strategy designed to instrumentalise regulatory bodies and silence Palestinian advocacy.
- On 11 January, a coalition of 44 organisations - including Greenpeace and the Trades Union Congress - issued a joint statement rejecting the British government's 'draconian' plan to grant police new powers to ban repeat protests. The groups warned that requiring police to consider the 'cumulative impact' of demonstrations in a single area represents an 'extreme proposal' that threatens freedom of assembly for all, from anti-racist marchers to farmers. Despite Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood's claim that the measures protect communities from 'considerable fear', the coalition dismissed this as a cynical attempt to justify a repressive crackdown and urged the government to immediately drop the 'dangerous' amendment.

- On 14 January, three prominent activists from the proscribed group Palestine Action - Kamran Ahmed, Heba Muraisi, and Lewie Chiaramello - ended their prolonged hunger strike. The Prisoners for Palestine group described the decision as a 'resounding victory' following reports that the UK Ministry of Defence had denied a £2 billion army training contract to Elbit Systems UK, a subsidiary of Israel's largest weapons manufacturer. While the activists had been at 'imminent risk of death', the campaign group claimed the strike served as a 'landmark moment of defiance' that successfully shed light on British complicity in the colonisation of Palestine. Although seven participants in total resumed eating, the protest remains a point of intense political debate, with MP John McDonnell praising the strikers' 'dedication' while the government maintains its crackdown on the group under the Terrorism Act.



- On 15 January, the Red Ribbons Campaign, which was initiated by the Palestinian Forum in Britain, launched a digital mobilisation with physical actions scheduled for 31 January. The campaign demands the release of over 9,000 Palestinian 'hostages' held by Israel.

Supported by the Global Alliance for Palestine and numerous other NGOs, the campaign aims to break 'international silence' regarding the systematic torture and unlawful detention of medical workers and children.

The initiative specifically condemns discriminatory new Israeli legislation permitting the execution of Palestinian prisoners by hanging, a move the UN warns is a profound violation of human dignity.



- On 20 January, the Arab Organisation for Human Rights UK filed a formal request with the Foreign Office seeking financial and travel sanctions against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The submission, prepared by law firm Deighton Pierce Glynn, alleges that Netanyahu has incited violence and genocide, citing his use of 'Amalek' rhetoric and his role in expanding illegal West Bank settlements.

The NGO argued that since the UK has already sanctioned ministers Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, it is no longer credible to exempt the leader who authorises their policies. This legal move follows the ICC's earlier issuance of arrest warrants for Netanyahu.

Conclusion

The events of January 2026 illustrate a widening gulf between the UK's formal diplomatic posture and its internal socio-political landscape regarding Palestine. On the world stage, the inauguration of the Palestinian Embassy in London on 5 January served as the ultimate tangible outcome of the UK's September 2025 recognition of statehood. This 'historic' milestone, championed by Ambassador Husam Zomlot, suggests a permanent shift in bilateral relations, moving toward a sovereign framework based on 1967 borders. Furthermore, the 14 January announcement of asylum for Hasan, the first Palestinian citizen of Israel to be granted such status in the UK, establishes a profound legal precedent that acknowledges 'well-founded fears of persecution' within the Israeli state structure.

However, this diplomatic elevation has been met with significant domestic tension. In Westminster and across local government, the Labour administration is performing a delicate balancing act. While Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper has positioned the UK as a cautious supporter of Phase 2 of the Peace Plan, she notably declined to join Donald Trump's 'Board of Peace' in Davos on 22 January, citing concerns over Russian involvement and the bypass of UN institutions. Simultaneously, the government is intensifying its stance against domestic BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movements. Communities Secretary Steve Reed's warning on 5 January that local councils could face legal damages for Israeli boycotts signals a prioritisation of central procurement laws over local political activism relating to Israel-Palestine.

The month also highlighted a stark escalation in the criminalisation and 'lawfare' surrounding Palestinian advocacy. The proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation led to the high-profile arrest of 86 protesters at Wormwood Scrubs on 24 January, following the 'thirst strike' of detainee Umer Khalid. These security-led actions, alongside the cancellation of MP Damien Egan's school visit due to NEU pressure, underscore a fractured national discourse where 'safeguarding' and 'terrorism' definitions are increasingly contested.

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