

Interactions *Between* *The UK* and Palestine

May 2026



Introduction

The following monthly interactions report for May 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 May 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 1 May, Justice Minister Alex Davies-Jones stated that pro-Palestinian marches in British cities have been hijacked by individuals seeking to sow division and hatred, noting that the demonstrations have witnessed antisemitic activity. Speaking to Times Radio, she condemned specific actions such as 'chants of death' and calls for a 'global intifada', arguing that these elements use the protests to cause fear and intimidation. While Davies-Jones stressed that the government is prepared to approve outright bans on demonstrations where necessary-as seen with the recent Al Quds Day march-she defended the fundamental right to protest the actions of Israel and emphasised that it is vital to recognise that not everyone attending these marches is antisemitic.



- On 8 May, it was reported that the UK Department for Business and Trade (DBT) granted two new military export licences to Israel, including an £8.7 million licence for targeting equipment components, despite the government's September 2024 suspension of such sales. The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) exposed the approvals, dismissing the DBT's defence - that the items are meant for re-export to third countries - as a legal fiction vulnerable to 'auto-diversion' by Israel for its own military operations. CAAT warned that the UK does not verify shipments post-export, citing past instances of diverted drone parts and noting that a second new licence for training aircraft components involves parts identical to those recently seized by Belgian authorities.
- On 8 May, Britain's charge d'affaires to the UN, James Kariuki, reaffirmed at a UN Security Council meeting that a negotiated two-state solution remains the 'only way' to achieve lasting regional peace. Kariuki warned that the current Israeli government is 'deliberately and rapidly' eroding the viability of this future by nearly doubling illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank - a flagrant violation of international law. Condemning ongoing violence against civilians, he stressed that acts of settler violence are not isolated incidents and called on Israel, as the occupying power, to fulfil its unmet international obligations to protect Palestinian communities.
- The UK Foreign Office summoned Israel's charge d'affaires, Daniela Grudsky Ekstein, on 21 May to condemn footage posted by Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. The video, which showed Ben-Gvir taunting detained humanitarian activists from the Global Sumud Flotilla, sparked international backlash and prompted British officials to demand an explanation regarding the treatment of those held, including several UK nationals. While the FCDO criticised the behaviour as a violation of basic dignity, Grudsky Ekstein distanced the broader Israeli government from the minister's individual actions.

Parliamentarians, political parties, and official/semi-official bodies

- On 7 May, the British local elections delivered a profound structural shock to the political landscape, fracturing the traditional two-party monopoly and leaving sixty-four councils under No Overall Control. The shift was heavily driven by a historic collapse for the governing Labour Party, which shed 1,498 English councillors and lost control of 38 councils in its worst mid-term performance in living memory.

The issue of Palestine emerged as a potent driver of this realignment. Grassroots coalitions successfully put ceasefire advocacy on the ballot, capitalising on public anger over the war in Gaza to elect 213 alternative independents and secure 441 net gains for the Green Party. Supported by groups like 'Vote Palestine' and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, over 600 successful council candidates signed formal pledges to pressure local government pension funds to divest from companies linked to arms supplies and international law violations

- On 13 May, UN Special Rapporteur Gina Romero warned that the UK's new Crime and Policing Act risks undermining fundamental democratic freedoms and violates international human rights obligations. Criticising provisions that criminalise face coverings and grant police broad powers over 'cumulative disruption', Romero stated that banning pro-Palestinian protests would be an 'affront to democracy' and disproportionately target Muslim communities. Her comments followed Prime Minister Keir Starmer's consideration of protest bans after stabbings in Golders Green, with Romero countering that while antisemitism must be tackled, it should not justify broad restrictions on peaceful assembly ahead of planned Nakba Day demonstrations.

- On 15 May, it was reported that eight Israeli mental healthcare startups visited the United Kingdom as part of the second Dangoor Health-Tech Academy delegation, highlighting expanding medical and scientific cooperation between the two nations despite ongoing war-related challenges. Organised by the UK-Israel Tech Hub at the British Embassy in Tel Aviv, the delegation presented advanced AI-driven care models to NHS trusts and investors, culminating in a reception at the House of Lords. British Ambassador Simon Walters welcomed the initiative, noting that connecting Israeli scaleups to the UK market supports Britain's public priority to modernise its mental health services through innovation.



- On 18 May, Michael Rubin stepped down as director of Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) after a decade of lobbying to maintain pro-Israel influence within the Labour Party. During his tenure, Rubin worked to sideline the party's pro-Palestinian faction and counter opposition to Israel, particularly during the Corbyn era and following the post-October 7 military campaigns. Rubin, who is reportedly moving into corporate consultancy, praised the pro-Israel MPs he collaborated with to institutionalise 'support for Israel' as a core Labour value, leaving LFI as it prepares to appoint a new director to continue its Westminster advocacy.
- On 18 May 2026, Simon Dubbins, a prominent pro-Palestine campaigner and Unite's International Director, launched a leadership bid to challenge current general secretary Sharon Graham for control of the 1.2 million-member union. Dubbins, backed by the far-left United Left faction, accuses Graham of failing to take a tough stance on UK defence industry deals with Israel and advocates for a full arms embargo and BDS campaigns. In contrast, Graham enters the election as the favourite, maintaining a 'jobs first' philosophy that prioritises protecting British defence and aerospace jobs over external political activism.
- On 22 May, it was announced that Parliament will debate an e-petition calling for a public inquiry into 'pro- Israel influence on politics and democracy' on 22 June, after the text surpassed 115,000 signatures. The Jewish Leadership Council (JLC) had previously urged parliamentary authorities to reject the petition, arguing that it relies on antisemitic conspiratorial tropes and lacks credible evidence. However, officials dismissed the challenge - citing previous inquiries into Russian and Chinese influence as precedents - while the Cabinet Office confirmed the government opposes the specific inquiry but noted that the Prime Minister has ordered a wider review into lobbying and political access.

- On 26 May, Israel's attorney general announced the intention to charge Tzachi Braverman - Benjamin Netanyahu's former chief of staff and proposed ambassador to Britain - with fraud, breach of trust, and obstruction of justice. The allegations relate to the 'Bibileaks' affair, an investigation into the leaking of classified intelligence to a German newspaper to politically benefit Netanyahu during hostage negotiations.

Although Braverman is entitled to a pre-indictment hearing to contest the evidence, observers believe the move will effectively end his chances of taking up the London diplomatic post. The scandal - coming alongside a parallel investigation into other close Netanyahu aides - leaves Israel's UK mission facing prolonged uncertainty while its chosen envoy fights for his political future.

- On 30 May, it was reported that Manchester cafe owner Shams Sadiq accused police of trying to recruit him as an informant against the proscribed group Palestine Action. Sadiq stated that during a meeting on 15 May, officers offered him financial incentives and promised to 'turn a blind eye' to low-level offences, following a separate counter-terrorism interrogation at Manchester Airport. His lawyer plans to lodge a formal complaint, likening the recruitment tactics to methods used by the state during the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Greater Manchester Police declined to comment on the allegations, which follow the controversial banning of Palestine Action last year. Hundreds of activists- including Greta Thunberg- have since been arrested under the legislation for demonstrating support. The proscription has faced sharp international backlash, with UN human rights chief Volker Turk previously condemning the UK's use of terror laws against the group as a disproportionate restriction on fundamental freedoms.



NGOs – Solidarity groups

- On 5 May, Palestinian political activist Samir Sinijlawi accused Britain and other Western governments of 'betraying Palestinian democracy' by continuing to legitimise the entrenched leadership of Mahmoud Abbas. Speaking at a JW3 event in London, the former Fatah youth figure warned that this Western backing blocks essential political renewal within the Palestinian Authority - a failure he described as deeply dangerous for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Sinijlawi, who spent time in an Israeli prison as a teenager before transitioning to peace advocacy, urged a pragmatic shift toward non-violence, a two-state solution, and mutual recognition - including the necessary Palestinian acknowledgement of Jewish historical ties to the land. Framing the current impasse as a struggle of moderates against radicals, he called on centrist factions from both sides to form partnerships to revive the peace process.



- On 6 May, the Palestine Coalition filed a formal complaint with the London Mayor's Office (MOPAC) against Met Police Commissioner Mark Rowley over comments he made on 1 May. Rowley had asserted that organisers intentionally tried to route pro-Palestinian marches past synagogues - an allegation the Coalition condemned as false, racially discriminatory, and deliberately intended to stigmatise their protests.

The Coalition, which includes the likes of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), the Palestinian Forum in Britain (PFB) and Stop the War, amongst others, demanded a full retraction ahead of their annual Nakba Day March on 16 May. Organisers also accused the Met of double standards for restricting their demonstration while allowing a same-day far-right 'Unite the Kingdom' march to occupy central London.

- Speaking to Al Jazeera on 15 May, UK artist Matthew Collings condemned the abrupt cancellation of his Margate art show, 'Drawings Against Genocide', which was pulled after UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) accused his 130 illustrations of relying on antisemitic tropes and dehumanising imagery. Collings strongly rejected the claims, clarifying that his artistic metaphors depict the brutality of Zionism and Israeli state violence rather than Jewish people, while criticising the ongoing conflation of pro-Palestine activism with antisemitism. UKLFI welcomed the gallery's decision, having previously warned that the exhibition - which focuses on Israel's genocide of Gaza - could breach public order laws.

- At a first-of-its-kind event in West London on 18 May, the Palestinian Forum in Britain hosted a ceremony under the auspices of MP Jeremy Corbyn to honour survivors and witnesses of the 1948 Nakba. The gathering drew a massive turnout of political and solidarity figures-including independent MPs, Green Party representatives, and Holocaust survivor Stephen Kapos-while paying a moving tribute to outgoing Palestine Solidarity Campaign chief executive Ben Jamal. Alongside cultural performances and traditional attire, the event powerfully revived the Palestinian narrative by naming guest tables after completely- destroyed villages, underscoring the vital importance of preserving historical memory.



- On 24 May, seven British human rights activists from the Global Sumud Flotilla arrived back in the UK via Turkey after their peaceful mission to deliver aid and break the illegal maritime blockade of Gaza was violently intercepted by Israeli forces in international waters. Upon landing at London Stansted, the deported activists bravely spoke out about the horrific conditions they faced, alleging that they were subjected to systematic torture, beatings, and sexual assault whilst held in Israeli custody. Despite the Israeli authorities attempting to dismiss the humanitarian mission as a political stunt and denying the severe abuse reported by the detainees, the activists emphasised that their suffering was nothing compared to the ongoing horrors faced daily by the people of Palestine.
- On 26 May 2026, Declassified UK and the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP) launched an open letter demanding that British citizens who served in the Israeli military be held to account. Signed by over 60 prominent figures - including Members of Parliament Jeremy Corbyn, Diane Abbott, and Zarah Sultana, Green Party leader Zack Polanski, human rights barrister Michael Mansfield, and former British Army General Charlie Herbert - the letter urges the government to investigate returning dual nationals for potential war crimes. Supported by groups like the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) and the Peace & Justice Project, the campaign recommends implementing mandatory disclosure and secondary screening for IDF veterans at UK ports, alongside robust domestic prosecutions.

Conclusion

The interactions of May 2026 expose a deep fracture between the UK's top-down state policies and an increasingly potent grassroots movement. Whilst the Foreign Office summoned Israel's charge d'affaires over Itamar Ben-Gvir's actions and James Kariuki condemned West Bank settlements, the Department for Business and Trade simultaneously granted a controversial £8.7 million military export licence. This state-level pushback extended domestically, with the government utilising the new Crime and Policing Act to restrict demonstrations and police allegedly attempting to recruit informants against the banned group Palestine Action.

Conversely, pro-Palestinian advocacy successfully pivoted from street protests to institutional and electoral levers. The local elections delivered a structural shock as Labour shed nearly 1,500 councillors, whilst grassroots coalitions propelled over 600 successful candidates to sign formal pension divestment pledges. This local momentum is directly juxtaposed against high-level lobbying battles: whilst the House of Lords welcomed an Israeli health-tech delegation, MPs like Jeremy Corbyn and the ICJP demanded war crimes investigations into returning dual-national IDF veterans, and a 115,000-signature e-petition successfully forced a parliamentary debate on pro-Israel political influence.

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