

Teacher Guide: Dealing with Conspiracy Theories

What gives
you hope?

What does
peace look
like to you?

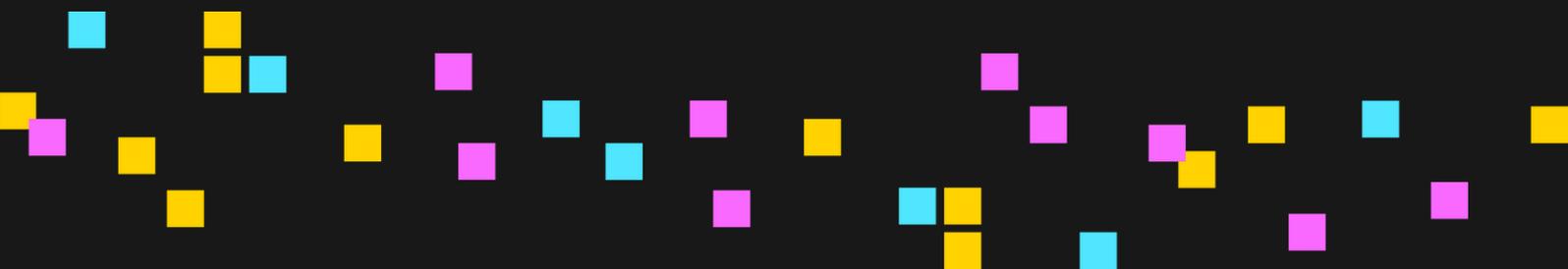
How do you
cope with fear
or anger?

How do
you react
to hate?

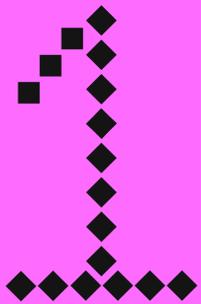
Introduction

This guide is to help schools and other educational bodies respond to conspiracy theories that may come into the classroom. It is intended to help you understand common conspiracy theories surrounding Israel, Palestine, Muslims, and Jews both in the UK and around the world, and how to deal with these conspiracies when you hear them in your classroom, or among colleagues.

Perhaps some of what you read below is new to you, however a recent study shows that three in five Brits believe at least one conspiracy theory (Opinium). The links included are there to provide some context and exploration around these conspiracies, but their content is not the work of, or in any way related to, SNS. The list is not exhaustive. You may also find it useful to attend one of our teacher CPD workshops on Understanding and Tackling Islamophobia and antisemitism in Relation to Palestine-Israel where we will address countering conspiracy theories in the classroom.



Combating Conspiracy Theories



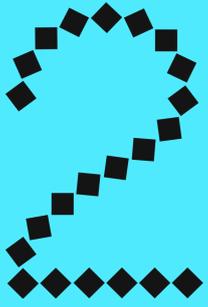
Is Pepsi controlled by Zionists?

Context: Existing since at least the 1980's is the conspiracy that Pepsi is an acronym for 'Pay Every Penny Save Israel' and is funding the Israeli state.

What had first emerged as an obscure phrase heard by schoolchildren across the Arab world became adopted by university students to anti-Zionist activists, Turkish journalists, Hamas members and Egyptian TV personalities and is still sometimes heard today.

Response: Pepsi is actually named after 'dyspepsia' which is another word for indigestion. The rumours around its name have not stopped Pepsi being sold across the region, with an £150 million-pound factory being inaugurated in Turkey. Interestingly, Pepsi initially chose not to sell its product in Israel in the 1960's following pressure from the Arab league to boycott Israel (Pepsi always denied the claim this was a boycott). Instead, it launched into the Arab world market, a move which resulted in a lot of criticism in the US, which was vehemently opposed to companies avoiding trade in Israel. Once Pepsi started selling in Israel in 1992 it actually faced a lot of backlash due to its marketing techniques and struggled to compete with Coca Cola which was already well established there.

Sources: [ADL article on Egypt and the Pepsi conspiracy](#)
[Snopes fact check on Coke and Pepsi in Israel](#)



Did Israel and the Jews create coronavirus?

Context: When the equally bizarre theory that 5G towers were spreading coronavirus appeared, some posts emerged online claiming that Jews owned the telecommunications companies and had only been building towers in non-Jewish areas. In times of public crisis, people quickly seek a scapegoat to direct their fear and misunderstanding at. Whether they believe the virus is real or not, people have taken to social media to claim that measures to control the virus are planned by Israel, as well as the US and China, to control global markets and cause the collapse of society. This has also extended to saying Jewish businessmen have a financial interest in spreading the virus. More common in the UK is the idea that Jewish communities are the primary spreaders of the virus. This has come from real news reporting that Jewish communities have suffered high numbers of infection and death rates. On the more extreme end, there have been posts urging others to spread coronavirus to Jews and to celebrate their deaths.

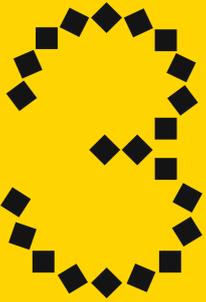
Response: This harks back to a classic antisemitic conspiracy from the 12th Century that Jews caused the Black Death. Thousands of Jews were murdered in response to these mistruths spreading, indicating the extreme harm such information can cause. There was an 18% increase in antisemitic hate crimes from 2018 to 2019 and researchers feared the coronavirus pandemic would see cases increase. Following coronavirus lockdowns in the UK at the start of 2020, there has been a change in the way antisemitic hate crime has materialised with violent attacks and assault reducing and attacks over social media increasing.

Sources:

[CST report on antisemitism and coronavirus](#)

[Reuters article](#)

[CST Antisemitic Incidents Report January-June 2020](#)



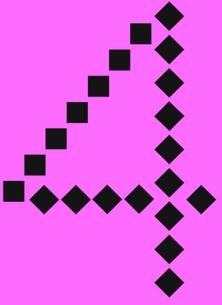
Palestinians don't exist

Context: A statement often heard among the far-right, and other anti-Palestine circles is that Palestinians are a made-up identity created by Arabs as a political tool in opposition to Zionism and to forge a claim over the land. Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously stated that Palestinians do not exist and a multitude of arguments to support this have developed over time. These arguments include that Arabs living in Palestine never claimed sovereignty over the land and that the Arabic word for Palestine is not Arabic in origin, rather Biblical.

Response: Palestinians began developing a distinct national identity in the early 1800s in reaction to Ottoman and Egyptian control. After WWI, the land subsequently became the British Mandate of Palestine and the desire of self-determination for the Palestinian people in the land of Palestine remained strong. Most Palestinians claim to trace their ancestry to the Canaanites whose civilisation was based in the land including and around Israel-Palestine, its influence stretching from 4500 BC to 1500 AD. Palestinians have multiple ethnic origins whilst connecting to a unique Palestinian nationality and identity. Despite Palestine never being recognised as an independent state, Palestinian personhood has been enshrined in UN resolutions and spans across nations to connect people, some of whom, despite having never set foot in the Palestinian Territories, have a shared history, suffering and collective memory.

Sources:

[My Jewish Learning who are the Palestinians](#)
[Vox: Israel-Palestine misconceptions](#)



Did Israel create ISIS?

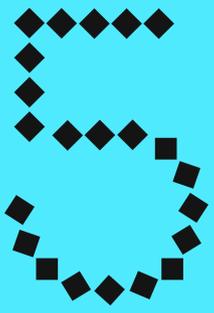
Context: Conspiracies that Israel and the US created ISIS, which have been circulating for a few years, were fuelled when Iranian state media claimed to have discovered ISIS was invented to break down resistance armies in the Middle East which are opposed to Israel. It was claimed a document of this information was provided to Iranian media by whistle-blower Edward Snowden. Other allegations are that the ISIS leader Abu al-Bagdadi was trained by Mossad and the CIA, that his real name is Simon Elliot, or that he is a Jewish actor hired by Israel to play the most wanted terrorist in the world.

Response: There is no credible evidence to support any of these theories. Snowden has neither confirmed nor denied that he provided information to Iranian media but also there is no evidence of a document containing this. What appears to be more likely is that Iran, seeing the impending threat of ISIS approaching its Iraq border, sought a national narrative of stability by claiming ISIS is just another Western plot to overthrow the Iranian government. Much of ISIS' narrative is based on destruction of Israel and the Jewish people as well as calling for its members to actively carry out attacks on them. Recently, ISIS militants in Sinai were urged to commit cross border attacks into Israel in response to the Trump administration's announcement of a new peace deal and Israel's threat of annexation. The conspiracy that Israel or the US created ISIS serves to disregard and downplay the active threat that the group continues to advocate for the murder of people in the West and Jewish people. Linking a violent extremist group to Western government only stirs a narrative of animosity, hate and revenge towards these governments for the miseries caused by ISIS in the Middle East.

Sources:

[Haaretz article on ISIS and Israel](#)

[Time article on Iranian media](#)



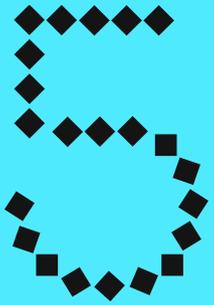
Do Palestinians/Muslims have lots of children to win the demographic war?

Context: This allegation can be found globally and is connected to the far-right belief that Muslims are trying to replace white Christian Europe in a demographic war, known as the Great Replacement. Demographic dispute has been a significant point of friction in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Birth rates can serve as a method to secure a population within the land whilst also providing a political threat, with a growing number of Palestinians and Israelis increasing the number of army recruits or militants able to fight in the resistance. During the second intifada, Yasser Arafat said, “The womb of the Arab woman is my strongest weapon” and during that period the Palestinian fertility rate in the Gaza Strip rose significantly to 8.3 births per woman.

In the UK, journalists and politicians have joined in the unfounded assertion that Muslim birth rates will soon be high enough take over the white British. This has long been written into anti-immigration and Islamophobic sentiment within British society and politics, with UKIP leader Nigel Farage claiming Britain was becoming unrecognisable from the number of immigrants. From a quick web search you can find more claims of this vein, such as by 2050, Britain will be a majority Muslim nation, or sensationalising a study which suggested, with zero immigration policies in place, the Muslim population could treble by 2050.

Further abroad, claims that the Muslim population is threatening the majority one have emboldened policies of ethnic discrimination or even cleansing, as can be seen of the Rohingya in Burma who had child policies imposed on them despite only being 4% of the population.

Response: Whilst it is true that, in Europe, population growth has largely been driven by immigration, there is no consistent data to show how much of this is Muslim. The outlandish claims of rapidly growing Muslim populations have been widely dismissed as unfathomable.



Do Palestinians/Muslims have lots of children to win the demographic war? cont...

Predictions such as Muslims becoming the majority population in the UK based on birth-rate alone would require women to be giving birth to very high numbers of children. In reality, the birth rate among Muslims in Europe over the years has been decreasing, most recently at 2.1 in 2010-2015 (Christians were at 1.6% and Jews were at 1.8%). Previous data showing large increases in the Muslim population is more realistically based on an increase in people self-identifying as Muslim when they previously chose not to. If current immigration patterns in the UK do not change significantly (in fact, they are likely to become more strict) then the predicted Muslim population by 2030 will be only 8.3%. Muslim birth-rates across the world are decreasing in a trend less to do with religion, and more to do with economics, social services, conflict and displacement, women's empowerment and access to contraception. Birth rates amongst immigrants in Europe also tend to change to match that of the local population. In Palestine, birth rates have dramatically decreased since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. This has been even more significant within the Palestinian population inside Israel where the birth-rate has gone from 9.2 per woman in the 60's to 3.3 per woman in 2015.

Sources:

[Snopes fact check on Muslim population in Europe](#)

[Channel 4 fact check on Muslim majority](#)

[Pew Research Centre on Muslim population growth](#)

[Yale study on Israeli demographics](#)

[Columbia JIA the politics of demography in the Israel-Palestine conflict](#)



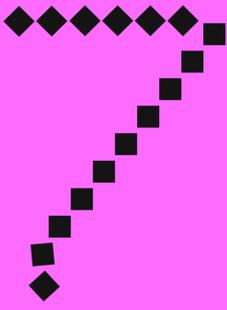
Did Israel know about or do 9/11?

Context: This is another conspiracy which can be rooted in the falsity that Jews control world events for their own benefit. There have been a variety of allegations that Israel/Zionists/Jews 'did 9/11' and the theory has gained some traction in the Arab World. One claim is that 4000 to 5000 Jews did not attend work at the World Trade Centre on that day due to the fact they have been forewarned about the attack by Israeli intelligence, who knew that it was going to happen all along and did not inform the US government. Some theorists claim that the US and Israel had masterminded the attack in order to justify a war in the Middle East (against Israeli enemies). This narrative was even broadcast in a series of radio ads by a right-wing activist, reaching large numbers of people.

Response: This multifaceted conspiracy has managed to unite antisemites across all groups who share disdain at the events of 9/11 and the subsequent impact it had on the Arab World. Many recognise that believing Israel and Jews knew about 9/11 could be used to legitimise attacks against Jews in the future by people already holding antisemitic beliefs. It has been reported around 400 Jews were sadly amongst the casualties of that day from an attack which did not discriminate between any religion or ethnicity. Other data has proven that, had 4000 Jewish workers not shown up that day for work, then the total Jewish casualty rate would have been much lower. There is also an extensive report by ADL dismissing Jewish involvement in 9/11.

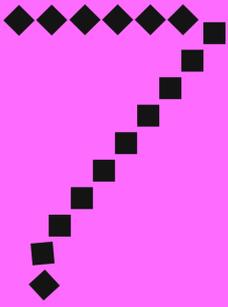
Sources:

[ADL Unravelling antisemitic conspiracy theories](#)
[Snopes fact check on Israel and 9/11](#)



Do Jews run the world? And Do Jews control the media?

Context: This antisemitic conspiracy is based on a book called 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', which fabricated the claim that cosmopolitan Jewish elites wanted to destroy the white nation state and become global dominators. The book has no singular author, but its origin can be traced back to a Tsarist official who made several publications. It has been edited numerous times from a variety of plagiarism sources. It is the most notorious antisemitic publication and was published globally in the early 20th Century and grew in popularity during WWII as Nazi propaganda to rationalise discrimination against Jews. Globally, the Protocols are still believed as a genuine proof of Jewish global domination and still hold popularity in much of the Arab and Muslim World. In contemporary society the impact of this text appears in conspiracies claiming that George Soros, the Rothschilds or other prominent Jews are controlling global finance/banking, immigration and wars. Hope Not Hate's survey of the British public found 13% agreed that Jewish people have an unhealthy amount of control over the world's banking system.



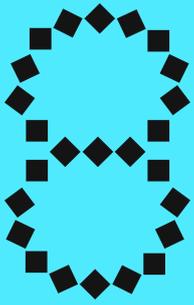
Do Jews run the world? And Do Jews control the media? cont...

Response: The Protocols have widely been dismissed as fake and courts around the world have taken legal action against groups or people distributing the text as a fact. One of its origins claims to be a reveal at a World Zionist Headquarters which doesn't exist. The use of such conspiracies throughout 20th Century history is a classic tool in othering Jews from society and making them a target for social and economic frustrations. Jews across Europe faced the same economic struggles as all the other Europeans trying to rebuild their lives and communities after WWI. On top of this, they also faced multifaceted antisemitic persecution stemming back to the 11th Century. Back then, Christian Europe prohibited Jews from owning property or working in most professions and trades, instead forcing them into the unpopular profession of moneylending. This resultantly led to the association between Jews and money and finance, and the various conspiracies of them controlling the economic sector. Studies on media corporations owned by people with Jewish heritage have shown that this does not impact on their media or serve certain Jewish interests and causes, nor do they work together in any co-conspiratorial way.

Sources:

[ADL: A Hoax of Hate Holocaust Memorial Museum page on the Protocols](#)

[Britannica entry on antisemitism HuffPost commentary on Jews and the media Hope Not Hate survey on conspiracies](#)



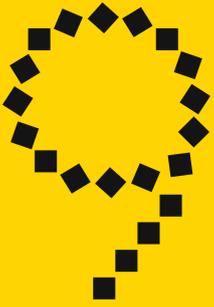
Did Muslims start the Holocaust?

Context: In 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu, the then Israeli Prime Minister, publicly claimed that the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem during WWII convinced Hitler to exterminate the Jews before the Holocaust. Netanyahu stated "Hitler didn't want to exterminate the Jews at the time, he wanted to expel the Jews. And Haj Amin al-Husseini went to Hitler and said, 'If you expel them, they'll all come here (to Palestine).', Hitler then asked, "What should I do with them?" and the mufti replied: "Burn them." The background of Netanyahu's comments root in a real meeting between the Mufti and Hitler. Haj Amin al-Husseini was Mufti under the political authority of the British Mandate in Palestine from 1921 to 1937 and collaborated with the Axis powers during WWII, helping to broadcast various antisemitic and anti-Israel broadcasts throughout the Middle East as well as inciting violence against Jews.

Response: The Mufti's discussion with Hitler, available to read online, focussed on al-Husseini's desire to formulate an Arab revolt against Jewish independence in Palestine and British and French colonial powers in the Middle East. Despite him viewing Germany as sharing a common enemy with the Arabs, Hitler was unenthusiastic at the potential of Arab revolt and refused to sign al-Husseini's declaration of Palestinian national rights. Much evidence also shows that the final solution and mass killings of Jews had already begun to take place around three months before this meeting. Despite some collusion within the Muslim world with the Nazis and contributions or bystanding to the persecution of Jews during WWII, nearly all Holocaust historians reject the claim that Muslims masterminded the Holocaust. In addition to this, Muslims were also victim to persecution and a number were also murdered during the Holocaust, while some Muslims helped to project and hide Jews in Europe and North Africa who were being rounded up.

Sources:

[The Times article on the Mufti and Hitler's meeting](#)
[Holocaust Memorial Museum factsheet on the Mufti](#)
[Project Aladdin The Holocaust and Muslims](#)



Did Jews fake the Holocaust so they could create Israel?

Context: The Holocaust has been wrongly co-opted as the cause of Palestinian tragedy created at the hands of European colonialists and Zionists. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has famously engaged in Holocaust denial and even published his doctoral dissertation on the claims that the number of Jewish victims was significantly less than 6 million, and that the Nazis and the Zionist movement had secret cooperation to prompt Jewish immigration from Europe to Palestine. Another related conspiracy is that Israel now receives reparation money from Germany and 'guilt' money from America in reaction to the Holocaust.

Response: There are other factors leading to the creation of Israel that existed before the Holocaust occurred. The Balfour Declaration, written in 1917, announced support for the establishment of a Jewish national home in historic Palestine. Many years of persecution against Jews in Europe meant there were already Jewish immigrants in Palestine prior to the events of WWII, which helped spur further support for a Jewish state. The Nazi government did not allow Jewish immigration out of occupied Europe during the war and tried to suppress it as much as possible. The British even tried to heavily limit the immigration of Jews to Palestine, in one famous case sending over 5000 Jewish refugees who arrived by boat to Haifa back to refugee camps in Europe. The Holocaust was not the only factor in Israel's creation but was one of many. Denial of the actuality or the extent of the casualties of the Holocaust have been widely disproven and are a typical example of antisemitism. The true reasons for the Holocaust lie in antisemitism, nationalism, eugenics and socio-economic factors which have been widely documented, alongside the massive death toll and impact. Reparations were not paid to individual Jews for the loss of life of family members, so the myth that the Holocaust was used as a way to receive money from Germany is untrue. American funding to Israel is not connected to the Holocaust, but rather to other trade and security interests the countries share.

Sources:

[Jerusalem Post article on Abbas' claims](#) [Vox: Israel-Palestine misconceptions](#), [The Holocaust Explained](#), [Jewish Virtual Library refuting Holocaust denial](#)

Educational Methods to Combat Conspiracy Theories

Socratic Questioning

- **Revealing the issue:** 'What evidence supports this idea? And what evidence is against its being true?'
- **Conceiving reasonable alternatives:** 'What might be another explanation or viewpoint of the situation? Why else did it happen?'
- **Examining various potential consequences:** 'What are worst, best, bearable and most realistic outcomes?'
- **Evaluate those consequences:** 'What's the effect of thinking or believing this? What could be the effect of thinking differently and no longer holding onto this belief?'
- **Distancing:** 'Imagine a specific friend/family member in the same situation or if they viewed the situation this way, what would I tell them?'

Conspiracy theories and psychology

Confirmation bias: People's willingness to accept explanations that fit what they already believe.

Proportionality bias: The inclination to believe that big events must have big causes.

Illusory pattern perception: The tendency to see causal relations where there may not be any.

Thank you

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