



CRIMINALIZING PALESTINE SOLIDARITY ACTIVISM IN THE UK

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Palestine solidarity activism in the UK has come under increasing attack in recent years. This policy brief explores the latest efforts by the British government to ban public bodies from using boycott, divestment, and sanctions tactics and to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism. It places these repressive measures within the history of long-standing British support for the Israeli regime, as well as within the context of proposed legislation that would criminalize a wide range of social justice and political movements. It spotlights successful efforts to resist this crackdown on dissent, and concludes with strategies for confronting this repression and for strengthening the connections between targeted movements.

The British government's support for Zionism has remained unwavering for over a century. Beyond its 1917 promise to the Zionists to establish a Jewish "national home" in Palestine, Britain consistently assisted the Israeli regime militarily, from developing [nuclear weapons](#) to ongoing arms sales. Although the British government has maintained an official opposition to Israeli settlements since 1967, it refuses to hold Israel accountable and even rewards the Israeli regime with deepening trade and diplomatic relations. This is a clear outcome of not only Britain's historic ideological alignment with Zionism, but also [its own foreign policy priorities](#) in the Middle East.

In line with these policies, the British government has long taken measures to quell Palestine solidarity activism. However, recent maneuvers mark a new era in British state repression and have serious repercussions for Palestine solidarity activism and allied movements. One of the government's preferred tactics is to associate the Palestinian struggle for liberation with terrorism. In 2003, as part of this approach, the British government introduced [Prevent](#), a strategy to deal with "extremism." Prevent targets "pre-criminality" and requires professionals in health and education sectors to identify potential extremists who have yet to commit a crime.

Despite the fact that most referrals made by professionals [are unfounded](#), they have damaging consequences for those referred, and Muslims have been [disproportionately targeted](#). Prevent also identifies [sympathies or interests in Palestine](#) as another possible sign of extremism, and the effects of this are already clear: [schoolchildren](#) have been interrogated by the police, and [university students](#) have been surveilled and harassed.

In addition to the defamatory association with terrorism and extremism, Palestine solidarity activism is frequently conflated with antisemitism. In 2018, the [British government adopted](#) the 2016 International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which purposely [conflates anti-Zionism with antisemitism](#). Since 2020, universities in the UK have come under pressure to adopt the IHRA definition, with the government threatening to revoke [funding streams](#) if they failed to do so. Many universities have succumbed to pressure, and as a result, Palestinian academics [face a heightened risk](#) of losing their positions.

Beyond the IHRA, the British government has taken legislative steps to limit the right to boycott, a direct threat to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In 2016, the government introduced “guidelines” that denounced procurement boycotts by public bodies as “[inappropriate](#).” These attacks have only escalated in more recent years, and anti-boycott legislation is set to [be introduced](#) in Parliament — a step that would jeopardize the work of a wide range of social justice campaigns.

Palestine solidarity activism also faces repression from legal maneuvers targeting social justice movements and vulnerable communities. Perhaps most worrisome is the [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill](#) (PCSC), which gives the Home Office and police forces broad discretion to deem protests illegal and to [arrest and charge](#) attendees and organizers.

Facing this new wave of state-led repression, activists have continued to push back — and in many cases, successfully so. This work offers a blueprint to defend against ongoing government repression and lay the foundation for future struggle.

- On university campuses, the forging of student and academic staff alliances is key to fighting oppressive policies. Academic staff can and must refuse en masse to participate in government-mandated spying on students, and likewise can push universities to reject the use of the IHRA definition.
- Legal pushback against the delegitimization of the BDS movement has been particularly effective. In the UK, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and a coalition of allies [have fought](#) the British government’s attempts to silence BDS in the courts, and [legal interventions across Europe](#) have been similarly successful. Activists and social justice movements can and should draw upon this new body of legal precedence.
- Palestine activists should continue to mobilize against the PCSC and other government maneuvers in broad intersectional collectives. These collectives are not only able to exert greater pressure on the government, but they are rooted in the conviction of the connectedness of struggles, as well as a shared belief in resistance to oppression.