

Pro-Palestine Activism and Prevent

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The Government is confusing legitimate political activism with the supposed threat of ‘extremism’. This has been seen in recent reports of British school children being referred under the Prevent Counter-Terrorism Strategy for pro-Palestine activism. If schools are to create democratic citizens, such activism should be regarded as **a legitimate expression of political engagement and not ‘extremism’**. Current approaches which involve the implementation or threat of Prevent are weakening **democratic rights and Freedom of Speech**. Under international law many Israeli settlements are illegal, so protesting against them is not a sign of ‘radicalisation’ or ‘extremism’, rather it is a sign of healthy democratic engagement.

Despite the illegal actions of the Israeli Government, including the forced expulsion of Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah and the bombing of Gaza in May 2021, **activism in support of Palestinian rights has faced criticism by the UK Government and has been threatened and derailed by the Prevent Counter-Terrorism Programme.**

Groups such as [Palestine in Schools](#) and the [Islamophobia Response Unit](#) have recorded **hundreds of instances** of pro-Palestinian activism being mistaken for **‘extremism’ or antisemitism**. [Muslim Engagement and Development](#) (MEND) alone reported over 146 instances, with 40% leading to a verbal or physical reprimand, 17% to detention, 2% to suspension, 12% to exclusion 2% to the police being called; and 1% to a Prevent referral. The most common forms of activism punished were the wearing of Palestinian emblems such as the flag or the keffiyeh (30%), and the expression of vocal support for Palestine (23%). **School students have been told that displaying the Palestinian flag equates to support of terrorism** – one educator comparing it to a swastika whilst others used discriminatory language against Muslim students. Individual cases include a 15-year-old being sent to isolation for **wearing a Palestinian scarf**, a student being cautioned for **wearing a ‘Free Palestine’ badge**, a 14 year-old being physically abused by staff, and a 5 year-old removed from class for questioning; others faced Islamophobic language.

These and [other examples](#) of students or [activists](#) being framed as ‘extremists’ take place in the context of UK counterterror legislation that **disproportionately targets Muslim activism**. In particular, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (‘Prevent Duty’) places legal requirements on public bodies and educators to identify early signs of ‘radicalisation’; resulting in the traumatic referral of children who have done no more than express a legitimate political opinion. This is facilitated by the fact that Prevent’s notion of ‘extremism’ is ill-defined and vague, and therefore targets [many forms of democratic activism](#). The resultant **shutting down of legitimate protest can promote rather than prevent political violence: undermining democratic rights can legitimate violent alternatives.**

To challenge this threat to our democracy, there must be **a truly independent review of Prevent** that works with community groups, academics and minority communities who are concerned by the expanding scope of counter-extremism. **The language of Prevent and counter-extremism frames activism as a threat rather than an essential part of an active democracy; as such it must be removed to ensure that legitimate political engagement can be encouraged and facilitated in schools and society.**

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