

The Effects of a Lack of Impartial Education on Israel-Palestine in British Schools

*A Case Study of the student experience in
English, Northern Irish & Muslim/Jewish
Faith Schools*

Aimée Stephanie-Reid
Haneen Zeglam
Sam Lytton Cobbold

Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to a large extent a legacy of British colonialism in the Middle East, characterised among other things by the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Despite this, the history of the conflict is an area where the UK school curriculum falls short. This research project seeks to better understand the effects of this neglect on ex-pupils' understanding of the conflict today. In doing so, it hopes to make a humble contribution to the argument to decolonise the UK curriculum, that is, to better educate future generations about the history and legacy of British colonialism in Israel-Palestine in order to help foster a fairer British foreign policy in the region today.

In order to do this, the project investigates specific issues related to the general neglect of the Israel-Palestine conflict in UK schools through enquiries into students personal experiences. We focus on a small sample of students who were educated in the same kinds of institutions as ourselves, namely **English state & private schools, English faith schools** (we look at Muslim and Jewish faith schools specifically), and **Northern Irish schools**, in order to gain some cursory insight into some of the issues presented by how they engage with Israel-Palestine.

Through a series of interviews, the project analyses students' personal impressions of how their education has affected their current views on the conflict, asking: what, if anything, they learnt about the conflict while at school; what problems they perceived in the way they were, or *were not* taught about it; and ultimately, how this affects their engagement with the conflict today. Their responses are contextualised with reference to the UK education system's approach to Israel-Palestine, as well as other socio-cultural factors, in an effort to identify some of the effects of the lack of impartial education on Israel-Palestine in British schools.

While our study is far from exhaustive, the humble purpose of our research is to paint a picture of education on Israel-Palestine in the UK; to be able to show where it is taught, if at all, and what effects this can have on students. In doing so, it highlights areas for further research in order to further the argument for curriculum review and revision.

The aims of our project are therefore as follows:

1. **To learn** and compare how a cross section of secondary school students from a range of different schools learnt about Israel-Palestine
2. **To highlight** the principal and consistent problems presented by our interviewees and contextualise them
3. **To infer** wider hypotheses for the situation at the national level in order to suggest areas of future research

Methodology

In order to study specific student experiences, we have conducted in depth interviews with 12 university students centred on how they learnt about, or interacted with, Israel-Palestine while at secondary school. These students were equally divided across the types of schools that we chose to focus on: state, independent and Muslim/Jewish faith schools based in

England as well as pupils who were educated in both Catholic and Controlled schools in Northern Ireland.

The research firstly presents a general picture on the state of education on the conflict, before dealing with the specific examples of Faith Schools and Northern Irish schools. Each section provides some background information about the schools it is studying in order to contextualise the issues presented by our respondents, before presenting a summary of our interview findings. It concludes by summarising the key issues highlighted through our interviews and suggesting areas for further research, before citing a list of pioneering organisations that are addressing the problems highlighted by the report.

(1) A General Picture

The Context

In recent years, and particularly in light of the Black Lives Matter movement, there have been louder and more determined calls for wider education on the history and ongoing effects of British colonialism in UK schools. History teachers and publishers have responded as we shall explore, but a poor uptake of GCSE and A-Level history courses dealing with regions in the global south, such as the Middle East, represents a persistent problem that affects the level of teaching on such subjects as Israel-Palestine. The section below highlights some relevant statistics, gathered by members of the Balfour Project's advisory board, for courses focusing on the Middle East.

Various different types of school exist in the UK, and each have different obligations when it comes to what they teach. In theory, all school curriculums are guided by the National Curriculum until GCSE and A-Level, at which point the vast majority of schools select specific courses in each subject from the range offered by the UK's major exam boards. For those who continue to study History beyond the age of 14, the National Curriculum takes the form of GCSE and A Level. At both levels, the three major exam boards offer different courses for schools to choose from and, at each level, one exam board offers a course on Modern Middle Eastern history. One GCSE exam board offers a course entitled: "[The Middle East 1945 – 1995](#)", 60% of which is on Israel/Palestine. The course constitutes 30% of the two-year course—a term and a half of study—and attracts about 2,000 out of the 120,000 students who take history with this board, just 1.6%. The British mandate period is also noticeably not covered. There is also one International GCSE (IGCSE) course entitled "[The Middle East: conflict, crisis and change, 1917 – 2012](#)", 50% of which is on Israel/Palestine, constituting 25% of the whole IGCSE course, or bit more than one term's study, and currently attracts 2,300 candidates, mostly from independent schools in the UK.

At A-Level the situation is largely the same, with one exam board offering an option entitled "[The Middle East 1908-2011: "Ottomans to Arab Spring](#)," 70% of which is focussed on the Arab-Israeli conflict. This option constitutes 30% of the two-year course, amounting to about a term and a half of study, but again only has about 400 candidates out of a total of 15,000 who take this board's A level, a meagre 2.6%.

These statistics should be taken in light of the knowledge that many different courses dealing with British, European and world history are on offer, and that several of them attract fewer students than the Middle East options. Nevertheless, it remains a fair assumption to make that at secondary level, only a handful of schools and their students study courses focusing on Israel-Palestine, and it is therefore extremely unlikely that UK students will have received any formal education on the present or past conflict, nor on Britain's historical role in the region. This hypothesis was reflected through our interviews discussed below.

Findings

Whilst we do not expect these interviews to necessarily reflect the general situation at national level due to limitations on sample size, the following findings shed light on how UK pupils' schooling has affected their stance on the conflict today. Firstly, our interviews echoed our hypothesis that very few students would have studied any aspect of Israel-Palestine while they were at school—**none of our interviewees** (other than some in Northern Ireland, discussed later) had ever formally studied the conflict at school.

Responses were largely synonymous between respondents hailing from state and private schools and there did not seem to be any consistent difference in experience between students from all walks of life. Despite their personal views on the conflict, most students confirmed that they were in no way defined by their school experience, and on the whole, interviews suggested that students felt dissatisfied with their understanding of what they saw as an important, yet polarising, issue. Such diverse factors as whether or not students had had a religious upbringing or went to a religiously-affiliated, fee-paying or free school made no difference to their responses.

Alternatively, **all of our respondents** confirmed that any knowledge they did have about the conflict had come from friends, family, community, or their own research. Whilst some students had vague memories of individual teachers bringing up the conflict in relation to RS (Religious Studies) classes or as part of learning about the outcomes of the Second World War, most stated that 'Israel-Palestine' was rarely, or in fact never mentioned either formally or informally among friends.

Some respondents that had been interested in the conflict while at school told us that they were inclined to undertake their own personal research as a result of the lack of any formal education at school. However, it emerged that this research often served to entrench the opinions they previously held, which tended to be pre-formed by their family or community. "It just meant that my views were entirely self-informed" stated one respondent, who added "my overall stance was given to me by my parents, but my knowledge of the conflict is thanks to the fact that I chose to spend a lot of my time researching and engaging with the conflict, albeit from the perspective I inherited from them."

For students that had not been particularly interested in, or were oblivious to the conflict while at school, the lack of formal education on the conflict that they received at school left them with a lack of confidence when discussing the topic with friends and colleagues in later life. In general this led students to avoid the topic; one respondent felt it was

“unapproachable in conversation”. Respondents with similar apprehensions cited a perception of the issue as being “polarizing” as the main barrier, with their personal lack of knowledge stopping them from engaging in discussion. On the whole, these students reported that they had learnt next to nothing about, and rarely discussed the conflict at school. One privately educated respondent bucked this trend, stating that the lack of education they received on Israel-Palestine at school “has probably helped me approach it more openly [at University], especially being surrounded by a wider range of voices than I was at my predominantly white and middle class school,” but admitted that they wish they had learnt more about Britain’s historic involvement in the region.

In summary, for the sample of students we interviewed, the conspicuous lack of formal education provided about the Israel-Palestine conflict meant that: (1) many respondents held one-sided opinions, ultimately shaped by their families or communities; or (2) had no real opinion on the state of the conflict. Either way, respondents were largely unaware of Britain’s historical role in the region. Whilst the responses detailed here are not demonstrative of the wider situation, coupled with evidence for a lack of uptake on the few courses provided on Israel-Palestine at GCSE and A-Level, they suggest a bleak picture for the wider situation in the UK. This highlights the urgent necessity of further research into the effects of a lack of education in UK schools on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

(1.2) Muslim and Jewish Faith schools

The Context

While absolute figures are hard to verify, the Association of Muslim Schools lists [155](#) independent Islamic schools in the UK and the Partnership for Jewish Schools reports that they work with over [120](#) Jewish schools. However, although Muslim and Jewish schools only account for a marginal percentage of UK schools, we believe the teaching of Israel-Palestine in these contexts is vital. For this reason, we dedicated a good portion of our research to understanding the experiences of students of faith schools.

Although faith academies and state schools with a faith leaning do exist, by far most Jewish and Muslim schools in the UK are entirely independent, allowing them to operate with vast deals of freedom. Independent schools, including independent faith schools do not have to teach the National Curriculum. This means one area of weakness in our research is failing to capture a ‘standard’ Jewish or Muslim education in a faith school when there is no standardisation amongst them. While all registered private schools are required to adhere to the government-issued Independent School Standard, these provide very little detail and so the content of teaching can vary massively in practice. This means for the purpose of our research it is almost impossible to collect a clear picture of how the topic of Israel-Palestine is broached in many these schools (if at all) and we must be careful not to extrapolate too much from our participant interviews given the likelihood that every Muslim and Jewish school approaches the topic with some level of variation.

Further compounding this problem of opaqueness is the growing government concern over the amount of Muslim and Jewish children being educated full-time in unregistered schools,

not counting those who attend unregulated religious schools part time. In both of these cases the Department of Education is concerned about a complete lack of regulation and oversight. While the Independent School Standards are vague, they do require independent schools to submit to regular inspections and ensure they are teaching a respect for tolerance and harmony. With this in mind, Ofsted have recently promised to take a tougher line on faith schools and illegal schools over concerns that children are not always receiving a balanced and modern education. This is all very relevant to our research with pupils who were educated in Muslim and Jewish schools. Given the vast disparity even within these categories, any generalisations based on our findings must be cautious.

A [recent Ofsted report](#) on independent faith schools found that while ‘sensitive and controversial topics were largely managed effectively’, there were also instances of teaching that had ‘a repeated bias in favour of one group’. For example, ‘wording used to describe the situation in Palestine’, seen in a Muslim school, used what the report calls ‘inflammatory language’. Similarly, in a Jewish school, ‘pupils’ writing used strong language in describing situations in that part of the world. Some of the published teaching materials contained bias or incorrect information about the beliefs of other religions and groups’. Most tellingly, and interestingly in the case of our research, Ofsted found that ‘staff had to manage considerable emotion where there were direct connections between the pupils and the sensitive issues in certain parts of the world. In a Jewish school, the girls held views about Palestine that were influenced by events that had happened to relatives who live in the region. Scripture and commentaries were used to balance arguments successfully with most pupils but, for some with direct personal contact with conflict, there was a reluctance to move from their pre-formed ideas’.

Findings

Before conducting our interviews with students who had graduated from either Muslim or Jewish secondary schools, we undertook some preliminary research. By accessing the websites and prospectus materials available online for some of the largest and most well-known faith schools in the country, certain trends with regard to their teaching of Israel-Palestine became apparent.

On this surface level based on public information at least, Jewish schools seem to have a much stronger connection with Israel than Islamic schools do with Palestine. Before interviewing our participants, it was hard to verify how true this is of the day-to-day reality but it is certainly true in terms of the extent to which they publicise these relationships. After briefly researching the ten largest Jewish schools in the country, nearly all can be found to reference instilling a strong connection to Israel as a priority on their websites. One example would be JFS who encourage their Israel Residential Schemes to ensure ‘JFS’ long and proud tradition of association with the State of Israel’. Below is a longer extract on their provision of [Israel Education](#) –

‘Israel is at the heart of JFS. Students are encouraged to engage with Israel through visits in Year 9, our active Israel Club and the celebration of all Israeli festivals. We are proud that many students go on to complete a year of further study, volunteering and social action in Israel before commencing university. Israel Club provides a forum

in which students and staff can celebrate their love for Israel, as they learn about Israeli culture, history, food, and geography through experiential programming’.

There is reason to believe similar attitudes are held in many different Jewish schools around the country. The [Partnership for Jewish Schools](#) (PAJES) provides resources for over 100 schools they work with, suggesting despite the freedom independent status offers, some level of uniformity among Jewish schools may still be present to some extent.

The Pears Foundation recently published their [‘Jewish Lives’ survey](#) after having followed several hundred Jewish students from 2011 until their final year in 2018 making it the UK’s most comprehensive study of Jewish school education. Their overall conclusion is that the ‘the greatest educational success’ of Jewish schools may be their programmes of Israel Education. Compared with pupils at non-Jewish schools, the Jewish school pupils left with ‘a greater understanding of Israel and a greater intensity of feeling towards the state’. By their GCSE year, close to 90 per cent of students had been to Israel once, compared to 70 per cent when they started school. The report found that ‘the foundations of Israel Education in the UK are sound’ and participation in trips to Israel is higher than in nearly every other country in the world.

These reports and organisations, as well as the information provided by the schools themselves, all suggest that it is very common for Jewish schools to have a programme of formal and structured Israel Education. In sharp contrast, none of the Islamic schools researched made any reference to Israel or Palestine in any of their published information - including websites, publicly available curriculums and schemes of work or any news releases about school activities including trips and charity events. This was a striking initial finding that was later supported by our participant interviews. While our participants from Islamic schools remember some mentions of Palestine, as will be discussed in greater detail further on, any references were minimal compared to the emphasis on Israel in Jewish schools. There are many possible reasons for this, none of which can be proven or addressed at length by this research but are worth briefly considering all the same. Below are two of the most compelling potential reasons -

- There is more diversity in ethnic background typically at Islamic schools and so the topic of Israel-Palestine holds less relevance to some than others. For example, although the Palestinian cause is often affiliated with Muslims worldwide, it is often more strongly represented among Arabs while the largest ethnic background of British Muslims is South Asian. This is in contrast to Jewish schools where although ethnic backgrounds may be similarly varied, Israel is the only focal point of Jewish nationalism.
- A desire to avoid the sensitivity of the topic. With the emphasis in recent years on ‘British values’ in UK schools and the rise of counter extremism programmes like Prevent, some Islamic schools may choose to avoid the topic entirely. Cases have been publicised recently of [textbooks](#) and exam boards under fire by the Board of Deputies of British Jews with complaints of anti-Semitism and partisan leaning when writing about the conflict, demonstrating the heightened tension and scrutiny around the teaching of the topic right now which Islamic schools may be trying to avoid.

However, it must be clarified that these are simply hypotheses at this stage and greater research is needed to better understand this divergence.

Turning to our interviews, three main points of comparisons and one area of similarity became clear between our Muslim and Jewish participants and their experiences learning about Israel-Palestine at school.

The first comparison found in the interviews supports the point already theorised. While our Jewish participants remember constant references to Israel, our Muslim participants barely recall any mention of Palestine other than in a few rare contexts. One Jewish participant recalled clear memories of 'going to school in blue and white for Israel Independence Day...with the whole school dressed in Israeli flags'. Another participant remembers being 'engulfed' by references to Israel as both a holy land and a homeland. Aside from heavy symbolic references to Israel, the Jewish schools of our participants also encouraged students to develop a relationship with Israel very practically with trips and tours being offered by the school of one participant every year from Year 9-11.

In direct contrast, our participants from Muslim schools maintain that Palestine was rarely brought up. Although our research is not enough to understand the reasoning of the schools on this, the absence of Palestine in our Muslim participants education is clear. It was mentioned at times, of course, but always in limited contexts and never regularly. One participant remembers a Palestinian charity being voted for by her class as the charity to which they chose to donate their fundraising money. Another remembers a man working with a well-known UK Islamic charity coming in to give an assembly on various humanitarian crises facing Muslims worldwide but although Palestine was mentioned, it was only one of many places listed. Another participant remembers a framed photo of Al-Aqsa Mosque hanging in one of the classrooms next to a framed picture of the Ka'bah in Mecca, representing two of the holiest signs in Islam but no attention was ever especially drawn to it.

The second comparison builds on what has already been discussed. Our participants report Israel being mentioned constantly in terms of identity whereas the few times Palestine did seem to be mentioned in Islamic schools was in reference to charitable causes. Whether it was an external guest speaker making a charity appeal or a class decision to choose to donate to a Palestinian charity, the case of Palestine rarely seems to have been brought up in a context that stressed identity or belonging. In fact, participants report the framing of Palestine as a charitable cause did more to make Palestine seem distant from them and their life in the UK as opposed to encouraging any sense of connection. Although a sense of religious obligation was stressed to help fellow Muslims in need, references to Palestine don't seem to have really gone beyond that. In the Jewish schools however, Israel was presented as an integral aspect of the British Jewish community's life, as opposed to a far-flung place desperate for humanitarian aid. While the Islamic schools focused on Palestine as a cause, Jewish schools seem to have celebrated Israel as a focal point of identity. For example, our Jewish participants remember 'students wearing IDF sweaters' and 'giving presentations about holidays in Tel Aviv in language classes'. One even mentions there were a fair amount of students choosing to serve in the IDF after school in order to one day make

aliyah and how this was often brought up and praised by teachers and members of the school administration. The message at one school is described as being 'all about Israel as our emotional home'.

The final comparison that becomes apparent also builds heavily on what has already been discussed. While Israel was mentioned both formally and informally in the school environment at Jewish schools, Palestine was only ever brought up informally. Here it should be explained that by 'informally' we mean passing references by teachers or conversations between students etc whereas 'formal' references would mean either Israel or Palestine being mentioned in the curriculum, lesson plans or planned assemblies. While Israel Education was built into the curriculum, our participants from Muslim schools only remember passing comments from teachers on Palestine, either in a political or religious context, but never having had any lessons focused on the topic.

However, while these differences seem stark there is also one significant similarity between how Jewish and Muslim schools handle the issue of Israel-Palestine. As far as our participants can recall, most times either Israel or Palestine were brought up by either Jewish or Muslim schools respectively, the other was almost never mentioned. Therefore, even though Jewish schools referenced Israel and Islamic schools occasionally referenced Palestine, our Jewish and Muslim participants still left school without ever formally learning the topic of Israel-Palestine as a contemporary conflict or even without formally addressing the existence of the other state.

For example, the few times our Muslim participants remember teachers or external guests mentioning Palestine, or Jerusalem especially, in either a religious or charitable context, no reference was made to the existence of Israel or the political situation in the region. In fact, one Muslim participant remembers a teacher confiding in her that the school had chosen to turn down a visit/ workshop offered by Solutions Not Sides because they had been 'unsure' about how parents would react to an Israeli guest speaker coming into the school. The preferred decision was to leave the topic entirely. Similarly in the Jewish schools, while Israel was seemingly everywhere, references to Palestine were also few and far between. One participant claims Palestine or the conflict in general was never brought up formally - it was informally acknowledged at times but always 'glossed over'. He recalls the first official mention of the conflict being an assembly with a guest speaker the school had brought in to talk to prospective University students on how to 'deal with pro-Palestinian views' by, for example, preparing them to answer accusations that Israel is an apartheid state. Another participant remembers all discussion was on 'Israel solely, rather than Israel-Palestine'.

Therefore, despite the significant differences in how Jewish and Islamic schools approach the teaching of Israel-Palestine, the biggest similarity seems to be how both avoid referencing the conflict or the region as a whole, instead focusing solely on either building a nationalistic connection to Israel or a religiously inspired sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians. When we began this project we chose to pay special attention to the teaching of Israel-Palestine in faith schools because we believed it would be telling and yet given the findings of our participant interviews, the most telling point to note is the seeming absence of Israel-Palestine education. Further research into history teaching in faith schools seems imperative in order to gain a clearer understanding of how these schools function, and

indeed greater research into how students and various faith institutions view the conflict would be instructive.

(1.3) Northern Ireland

The Context

Northern Ireland experienced a period of civil conflict from the 1960s to the late 1990s, a period collectively known as The Troubles. During this time over 3500 people were killed, with thousands more being left injured both physically and mentally. The cause of this conflict is complex and dates back hundreds of years, but it is generally acknowledged that the conflict was fought between the Nationalist, Catholic community (who want Northern Ireland to be reunited with the Republic of Ireland) and the Loyalist, Protestant community (who want Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom). The Troubles have had lasting effects on day-to-day life in Northern Ireland, as communities live in segregated areas with peace walls dividing them to minimise the outbreak of violence. The segregated living arrangements also spill over into the Northern Irish education system, as children are largely educated with only their own community. The education system in Northern Ireland is therefore divided into three main sectors: Catholic Maintained schools, Controlled schools, and integrated schools. Schools from across all of these sectors must follow the core curriculum set out by the Department of Education (DoE).

Controlled schools are under the management of a board of governors employed by the government's Education Authority. While these schools officially have no religion, many of these schools have ties to the Protestant church. The Controlled sector is the largest education sector in Northern Ireland with a total of 560 schools, 48% of the total number of schools in the country. Around 42% of all pupils in Northern Ireland attend a controlled school. There are 466 Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. These schools are controlled by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, which is made up of representatives of teachers, parents, representatives of the Department of Education, and representatives of Northern Ireland's Catholic bishops. Approximately 37% of students in Northern Ireland attend a Catholic school. While Catholic schools must follow the core curriculum set out by the DoE, the Catholic church does have a significant influence on what is taught in these schools. Integrated is a small sector of education in Northern Ireland. The churches are not involved in the development of integrated schools, these schools are made possible largely by the voluntary efforts of parents. Integrated education allows for members of the Catholic and Protestant community to be educated side-by-side in the hope of promoting reconciliation in the community. Only 7% of students are currently enrolled in an integrated school in Northern Ireland. As such a small minority of the population attend integrated school, they were not considered during this research.

In Northern Ireland, the Israel-Palestine conflict often serves as an [allegory for the wider Nationalist-Unionist conflict](#), with Israeli and Palestinian flags a common sight in Protestant and Catholic areas respectively, along with other common symbols of support such as murals, graffiti, and even support rallies. In view of this, we had assumed that interviews

with students from schools affiliated to different communities, as in the case with Muslim and Jewish faith schools above, would display a bias in their educational experience and views on the conflict. The findings are explored below.

Findings

Speaking to Northern Irish students it was obvious that religion played an important role in their upbringing and education, however not in the traditional way. Most of the people interviewed noted that while they did not regularly practise their faith, they were aware of their religion and the social teachings of it and that it was extremely influential in their education. All of those who were interviewed stated that they were aware of the existence of the Israel-Palestine conflict from a young age, due to flags being flown in their area and communities regularly holding rallies in support of one side or the other. However, despite their awareness of the issue, all participants stated that they did not know the specific details of the conflict until they were older.

From the interviews conducted, our findings clearly show a disparity in teaching the conflict between those who attended Catholic and those who attended Controlled schools. Those interviewed who attended Controlled schools stated that it was never spoken about in school, formally or informally. It became clear that teaching was not just lacking in terms of the Israel-Palestine conflict, but also on the Northern Irish conflict. Contentious issues were avoided in formal lessons and in assemblies. One interviewee claimed that it “*seemed to be school policy to avoid controversy*”. Controlled schools do teach about the Middle East, but the focus is on Biblical events, and modern issues are not discussed. In our interviewees' experience, Religious Studies focused on only the history of the Christian Religion and the Bible, leaving not a lot of room for contemporary social issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict to be discussed.

From our research, the experience across Controlled schools seemed to be quite similar, with all participants reporting a comparable experience with regard to their education and the topics that were introduced. Those educated in Controlled schools also did not often discuss the issue with their peers, despite acknowledging that they were aware of the conflict. Participants acknowledged that due to their lack of education on the conflict they were more inclined to seek out information on their own. One interviewee claimed that this may have been a good thing, as they were able to find information that they may not have had they relied on their own community to provide it.

Our research found that experiences amongst those who attended a Catholic school varied greatly depending on the teacher and location of the school. However, there generally is more focus on the topic of Israel-Palestine in Catholic schools than in Controlled schools. Those from a Catholic background also tend to hold a Nationalist identity and tend to feel a sense of solidarity with those in Palestine. Our research found that Catholic schools put the focus on Palestine, with one interviewee stating that in school he learnt about the existence of Palestine before he learnt about the existence of Israel. In Religious Studies classes the region is taught about in a historical sense, and the importance of the land of Palestine in the Christian religion is highlighted.

The conflict is also discussed in other subjects, such as Politics and Citizenship. The issue of identity is often discussed in Citizenship classes, and in Catholic schools it is common to discuss the identity of Irish nationalists by comparing them to Palestinians. Through our interviews we found that the Israel-Palestine conflict is not formally taught in politics classes, however as current affairs are discussed the conflict is regularly brought up. Research also revealed that the conflict is more likely to be discussed amongst peers in Catholic schools than in state schools. Young people in the Catholic community are very aware of the issue and discuss it often, however our interviewees acknowledged that anyone who held a stance which was considered to be Pro-Israel was often ostracised. While the Israel-Palestine conflict is taught about more in Catholic schools than in state schools, our interviewees noted that their education was very surface-level, and that any deeper understanding of the topic came from their own research, and through tertiary education.

In summary, religious and political affiliation—inherited through family and community—largely dictated students vision of the conflict in Israel-Palestine, regardless of the lack of formal education they received on the issue. While the topic was frequently referenced in Catholic schools, students still lacked a formal education on the issue. These factors led students to entrench their views, with community ostracism discouraging students to engage with the other side of the argument.

(2) Conclusion, Limitations, and Moving on

Conclusions

A number of key points are raised by the findings of this research, which are summarised here. The following general observations were made:

- Very few students in the UK received any formal teaching on the Israel-Palestine conflict, past or present, resulting in a lack of confidence to approach the topic in later life either formally or informally
- Rather than by their experience at school, students' opinions regarding the conflict—if they held any—were inherited from their parents, community, or are self-formed by independent research
- In both Northern Ireland, and Muslim/Jewish faith schools in the UK, experiences differ from the wider UK norm, and the topic is brought up more often both formally and informally at schools
- In Northern Irish Catholic schools, where solidarity with Palestine is informally established through teaching and as inspired by the wider Irish Catholic community, **as well as** in Jewish schools in the UK, the topic is more frequently broached, yet in a partisan manner

When put in context, our interviewees responses suggest that there is an insufficient level of education on the Israel-Palestine conflict provided in UK schools, and that there is

insufficient effort on the part of schools to ensure that students engage with the conflict in a non-partisan manner. These issues result in situations where:

- (1) Students with no connection to the conflict feel a lack of confidence to discuss the issue in later life, seeing it as overly controversial, while
- (2) Students with a connection to the conflict entrench the views inherited from their family or community.

While some dissatisfied students make special efforts to research the topic themselves beyond school, this often leads to their **developing a partisan or one-sided view**.

These concluding remarks are limited to our interviewees own experiences, and are therefore limited in scope. However, as discussed in the following section, they nonetheless raise important questions.

Limitations

The above observations are undoubtedly cursory, produced as they are by subjective interviews conducted within a small sample of students, suggesting a need for further rigorous examination of student experiences of dealing with Israel-Palestine in UK schools. However, the consistency of the issues raised above between interviewees, and their clear connection to contextual factors—such as community affiliations to either side of the conflict in Northern Ireland and English faith communities, or a general lack of uptake of Middle Eastern GCSE and A-Level history courses dealing with the period of the conflict—present them as potentially indicative of the wider situation. This research project therefore concludes by calling for further research into this issue, in order to support calls for curriculum review and revision. These suggestions are summarised below.

Moving on

This report ends with some specific suggestions for further research and points to note moving forward. We won't, however, present in detail any proposed solutions to the problem of the lack of standardised teaching on Israel-Palestine. We believe these discussions are huge debates in and of themselves, and our priority has simply been to clearly highlight the scale of the problem rather than aiming to solve it. Although this project has been small in scope, we believe it to be an important piece of preliminary research which we hope others will one day build on.

In looking at how Israel-Palestine is taught in many different types of schools across England and Northern Ireland, we have made indicative conclusions - the lack of education many receive on the topic in school, and the partisan nature of the narratives used in the schools that do address the conflict. However, although these two trends are clear from our interviewees experience, further large-n studies using both qualitative and quantitative methods are necessary to confirm our observations. Moreover, other questions remain unanswered; for example, while this study has focused on student experiences, interesting research could be done on the thoughts of teachers and school staff who are responsible for decisions over the curriculum and lesson plans. While it would be interesting to hear from the teachers who do make an effort to address the conflict, for example, in Northern Ireland, it would also be extremely revealing to research why so few teachers in English

state schools choose to teach the topic, especially when they have the choice with certain modules available. It would also be imperative that future research took into account the cases of Scotland and Wales in order to present a fuller picture of the UK education system.

Another matter to note in regard to this research's future relevance is how it fits into much broader and extremely relevant discussions in Britain today. Since the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, and subsequent demands to decolonise the curriculum, the conversation of how curriculums can best reflect contentious topics has begun, but has some way to go. The way we teach both British and Global history is being challenged and reformulated with a call for greater transparency and accountability for Britain's past to be seen in our curriculums. We must push to ensure Israel-Palestine and Britain's involvement in the conflict forms part of these changes. Given this wider context, we believe our research is more important than ever. Looking at how Israel-Palestine is navigated in classrooms is a telling example of how Britain deals with important conversations more widely.

Although this research focused on how young people form opinions on Israel-Palestine from their experiences at school, it soon became evident that with a lack of teaching, many were forming their opinions in different ways. Muhammed Amin, head of the research charity group [Curriculum for Cohesion](#), believes *"the problem is that if you do not teach the conflict that does not mean that pupils ignore it....what it means is that [students] will learn about the conflict from other sources"*. Such sources are more likely to be informal and partisan, furthering the divide in British communities and discrepancies in experiences. However, as a final note, we wish to draw attention to some organisations already working on this issue and the impact they're having.

[Parallel Histories](#), for example, provides a scheme of work used by over 200 schools, encouraging teachers and students to study the conflict from conflicting perspectives. Their success has been well documented in many pieces of news coverage. [Solutions Not Sides](#) similarly works to provide a critical approach to the education many receive on Israel-Palestine. By running workshops in schools often including visits from Israeli and Palestinian speakers, SNS helps students engage with the conflict and provides teachers with the tools needed to continue controversial yet important conversations. Such work is of the utmost importance considering the difficulty of approaching controversial subjects such as Israel-Palestine objectively, an issue highlighted by the recent withdrawal of [Pearson textbooks](#) dealing with the history of the conflict from UK classrooms due to their supposedly biased content.

Authors

Aimée-Stephanie Reid is an MSc candidate in Peace and Conflict Studies at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. Her research focus for this report was Northern Ireland, where she was educated at a Catholic School in Belfast.

Haneen Zeglam is an MPhil candidate in Modern Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. Having herself attended a faith school in Manchester, Haneen paid special attention to English students who had attended both Muslim and Jewish faith schools.

Sam Lytton Cobbold is studying for an MSc in Modern Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. Sam researched the situation in English schools, having attended an Independent School in London.

Edited by Sam Lytton Cobbold

With Special Thanks to Mike Scott-Baumann, John McHugo, Matan Rosenstrauch & the Balfour Project