

Expert Opinion on the Term *Intifada*

Prepared by:

Abdul Bashid Shaikh, Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Leeds

Mustapha Sheikh, Professor of Islamic Thought and Muslim Societies, University of Leeds

Email: a.b.shaikh@leeds.ac.uk and m.sheikh@leeds.ac.uk

This report has been endorsed by:

Neve Gordon, Professor of International Law and Human Rights, Queen Mary University of London

Kevin Mazur, Lecturer in Political Economy, King's College London

Shahd Hammouri, Lecturer in International Law and Legal Theory, University of Kent

Craig Jones, Senior Lecturer in Political Geography, University of Newcastle

Adam Sutcliffe, Professor of European History, King's College London

Haim Yacobi, Professor of Development Planning, University College London

Rahul Rao, Reader in International Political Thought, University of St Andrews

Musab Younis, Associate Professor of Political Theory, University of Oxford

Loubna El Amine, Lecturer in Political Theory, King's College London

Laleh Khalili, Al Qasimi Professor of Gulf Studies, University of Exeter

Penny Green, Professor of Law and Globalisation, Queen Mary University of London

Clive Gabay, Reader in International Politics, Queen Mary University of London

Ayça Çubukçu, Associate Professor in Human Rights, London School of Economics and Political Science

Yossef Rapoport, Professor in Islamic History, Queen Mary University of London

Anat Pick, Professor of Film, Animals and the Environment, Queen Mary University of London

Catherine Rottenberg, Head of Media and Culture, School of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London

Sharri Plonski, Reader in International Politics, Queen Mary University of London

Des Freedman, Professor of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London

Nicola Perugini, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, University of Edinburgh

Lewis Turner, Senior Lecturer in International Politics, University of Newcastle

Lynne Segal, Anniversary Professor Emerita of Psychology and Gender Studies, Birkbeck, University of London

Tanzil Chowdhury, Associate Professor in Public Law, Queen Mary University of London

Kate Hardy, Professor of Global Labour, University of Leeds

Tajul Islam, Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Leeds

Andrew Delatolla, Associate Professor of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Leeds

James Dickins, Emeritus Professor of Arabic, University of Leeds

Nicola Pratt, Professor of the International Politics of the Middle East, University of Warwick

Marie Petersmann, Assistant Professor of Law, LSE Law School

Avi Shlaim, Emeritus Professor of International Relations, University of Oxford

Dani Abulhawa, Lecturer in Contemporary Applied Performance, University of Leeds

James Eastwood, Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University
of London

Introduction

This opinion considers the meaning and use of the term *intifada*, particularly in light of its invocation in contemporary political discourse and its appearance on placards, chants and speeches during recent pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the United Kingdom. The analysis addresses whether the term should be understood primarily as an incitement to violence or as a historically situated political expression with multiple meanings.

Specifically, this opinion addresses the following questions:

1. What is the history of the term?
2. How has it been invoked in political discourse?
3. How has it been invoked by pro-Palestinian demonstrators in recent UK marches?
4. Does the term have any association with antisemitism, hate crime or international terrorism?
5. Concluding opinion: should it be banned?

1. What is the history of the term?

- 1.1 The term *intifada* (انتفاضة) derives from the Arabic root *n-f-d*, meaning “to shake off,” “to rise up” or “to rid oneself of something burdensome” (Wehr 1976). In modern Arabic usage, the term has been used broadly to describe uprisings, revolts or popular movements against injustice and domination. Importantly, the word itself does not inherently denote violence; rather, it signifies a collective act of resistance or refusal.
- 1.2 The term entered global political vocabulary primarily through its association with Palestinian history, particularly the First Intifada (1987–1993). This uprising emerged in the context of Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza following 1967. The First Intifada was characterised largely by mass civil resistance: strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, refusal to pay taxes and community self-organisation. It was widely understood at the time, including by international observers and human rights

organisations, as a popular grassroots revolt against an illegal military occupation (Sharp 1989).

- 1.3 The Second Intifada (2000–2005) differed markedly in form and perception. While it is often described as having been triggered by Ariel Sharon’s visit to the al-Aqsa compound and the collapse of the Oslo peace process, it also emerged against a background of escalating violence in the preceding period, including the extensive use of live ammunition by Israeli security forces against Palestinian demonstrators during the late stages of the Oslo era. Human rights organisations documented the widespread deployment of lethal force against unarmed protesters, contributing to a dynamic in which armed resistance increasingly came to be framed by Palestinians as a response to, rather than the initiation of, violence. The ensuing period involved some armed confrontation and military reprisals. As a result, in some Western media outlets and political discourses the term *intifada* became narrowly associated with violence and terrorism, abstracted from both its broader semantic meaning and the legal and political context of military occupation (Pressman 2006; Gordon 2008). But this was not the dominant way the term was viewed or used.
- 1.4 It is nevertheless well-established in international law that peoples living under foreign occupation possess a recognised right to resist occupation, including, within the limits of international humanitarian law, recourse to armed resistance against military targets, provided the principles of distinction and proportionality are observed (UN General Assembly 1974; Cassese 2005; Dinstein 2019). This legal framework complicates attempts to treat all forms of resistance during the Second Intifada as inherently illegitimate or criminal, and underscores the importance of situating the term *intifada* within its historical, legal and political context.
- 1.5 Outside the Palestinian context, *intifada* has also been used descriptively in Arabic to refer to other popular uprisings, including labour protests and anti-authoritarian movements in the Arab world and external to it, reinforcing that the term is not exclusive to Palestine nor *in any way* intrinsically tied to armed struggle.

2. How has it been invoked in political discourse?

2.1 In contemporary political discourse, *intifada* operates as a contested signifier: its meaning is not fixed, but is shaped by context, speaker, audience and prevailing power relations. Disputes over the term are therefore less about its lexical definition than about competing political frameworks through which it is interpreted and evaluated.

2.2 Within Palestinian political and social discourse, the *intifada* came to function not merely as an episodic uprising but as an institutionalized condition of collective resistance. It was sustained through coordinated leaflets, mass organizations, strike regimes, popular committees and forms of economic disengagement that structured everyday life under occupation. In this sense, *intifada* denoted less a discrete tactical programme than a shared political formation: a diffuse yet organized mode of popular mobilization encompassing endurance, refusal, solidarity, sacrifice and the assertion of alternative authority structures alongside Israeli rule (Cobban 1990). Crucially, Palestinian usage did not treat the term as synonymous with violence, nor as a directive for particular acts; rather, it operated as a shorthand for resistance understood in political, moral and historical terms.

2.3 By contrast, in segments of Western political and media discourse, the term has increasingly been subjected to a process of securitisation, whereby its meaning is narrowed and redefined through the lens of counter-terrorism and public order. In this framing, *intifada* is often abstracted from its linguistic roots and historical plurality, and instead read as a proxy for violence, extremism or terrorism (Attar and King 2023). This reductionist interpretation has the effect of transforming a political descriptor into a presumed threat, such that its utterance is treated as inherently suspect and dangerous regardless of context, intent or accompanying conduct.

2.4 This divergence illustrates a broader pattern identified in critical security studies, whereby political language associated with Muslim or anti-colonial struggles is reclassified as dangerous through repetition, insinuation and association, rather than through evidence of harm. In this process, meaning is not derived from how terms are used by speakers themselves, but from how they are reinterpreted by external authorities

operating within securitised frameworks. The result is a discursive slippage in which expressions of dissent are increasingly evaluated not as political speech, but as latent indicators of extremism.

2.5 Importantly, the contested nature of *intifada* does not imply equivalence between these interpretations. From an academic standpoint, the securitised Western reading rests on a selective and decontextualised understanding that privileges hypothetical offence over actual usage. By contrast, Palestinian and allied political usage remains anchored in historically grounded concepts of resistance, self-determination and collective struggle, none of which are inherently violent or unlawful. The contest, therefore, is not merely semantic, but reflects asymmetries of power in determining whose meanings are treated as authoritative.

3. How has it been invoked by pro-Palestinian demonstrators in recent UK marches?

3.1 Among pro-Palestinian demonstrators in the United Kingdom, the term *intifada* is generally invoked symbolically rather than operationally. Evidence from march organisers and public statements indicates that demonstrators invoke the term as a call for resistance to occupation, apartheid and structural injustice, rather than as an endorsement of violence or an instruction to cause harm. For example, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign has publicly rejected characterisations of the chant “*globalise the intifada*” as inherently violent, emphasising instead its political purpose as an expression of solidarity with struggles against occupation and injustice (*The Guardian*, 17 December 2025). Similarly, pro-Palestinian activists have strongly denied that such chants are antisemitic or supportive of terrorism, describing them instead as expressions of political resistance and grievance (*Middle East Eye*, 2025). Commentary in *The Week* has likewise reiterated that *intifada* is an Arabic term historically associated with “uprising” and “resistance,” and that its use in UK demonstrations has been framed by participants in these political terms rather than as an endorsement of violence (*The Week*, 2025). Taken

together, these public materials indicate that, in context, the term functions as political rhetoric grounded in opposition to perceived injustice, not as a directive to harm civilians.

3.2 Crucially, UK demonstrators do not understand themselves to be calling for harm to Jewish people, Israelis or any civilian population. Organisers and participants consistently frame their protests within explicitly non-violent registers, including demands for an end to violence, a ceasefire, compliance with international law and the protection of human rights. Public statements from Jewish groups active in these protests reinforce this interpretation. For example, Jewish Voice for Liberation stated that slogans like *intifada* should be understood in context as “a call to make resistance to Israeli crimes global,” and that “legitimate peaceful protest” should not be confused with unlawful activity (*Morning Star*, 2025). This group also noted that its Jewish Bloc participants have “always been prepared to challenge any antisemitism encountered on the demonstrations” and that it has “very rarely, if ever, encountered anything it needs to respond to,” underscoring the overwhelmingly peaceful intent reported by Jewish protest participants (*Morning Star*, 2025).

3.3 These public materials and quotes demonstrate that, in context, many Jewish protesters and allies interpret *intifada* as political rhetoric grounded in opposition to perceived injustice and violations of international law, rather than as a call to violence against Jews or Israeli civilians. This inclusive participation challenges interpretations that construe protest language as inherently hostile, and supports the conclusion that the term functions as a political symbol of resistance within a broader coalition advocating human rights and non-violence.

4. Does the term *intifada* have any association with antisemitism, hate crime and international terrorism?

4.1 Recent attempts by political actors and, in some instances, policing authorities to associate references to *intifada*—including the chant “*globalise the intifada*”—with antisemitism, hate crime or international terrorism require careful analytical scrutiny. It

is important to distinguish clearly between these categories, both conceptually and in law.

4.2 Allegations that chants such as “*globalise the intifada*” amount to antisemitic hate speech typically rest on the claim that the term *intifada* should be read as inherently violent and therefore as implicitly threatening towards Jewish people. This interpretation, however, cannot be sustained without abstracting the term from its linguistic meaning, historical usage and protest context. As set out elsewhere in this report, *intifada* is a political term denoting uprising or resistance, and does not, in itself, refer to Jews, Judaism or any racial or religious group. Whether a particular use of the term crosses the threshold into hate speech must therefore depend on context, intent and accompanying conduct.

4.3 A further and more expansive move has been to associate references to *intifada* with international terrorism, often by analogy with claims made in other jurisdictions, including Australia. Such claims typically rely on association by implication rather than evidence, collapsing distinct political, historical and ideological phenomena into an undifferentiated category of “extremism.” From an academic standpoint, efforts to link *intifada* to organisations such as ISIS reflect a fundamental category error. The Palestinian uprisings historically referred to as intifadas were territorially rooted, nationally framed and directed against a specific military occupation. By contrast, ISIS is a transnational Salafi-jihadist organisation that explicitly rejects nationalist liberation struggles, has expressed hostility towards Palestinian political movements and operates according to an ideological framework fundamentally incompatible with Palestinian resistance politics (Gerges 2016; Wagemakers 2016).

4.4 Conflating *intifada* with jihadist terrorism therefore does not reflect an empirical relationship but rather a securitised reframing of political language, in which Muslim-associated political expression is subsumed into counter-terrorism paradigms irrespective of context or intent. Scholars of security studies and critical terrorism studies have shown how such processes operate through repetition and insinuation, stripping political speech of historical specificity and reclassifying it as extremist without evidential grounding (Jackson 2005; Buzan et al. 1998; Kundnani 2014). Attempts to link the use of the term

intifada in UK protest contexts to unrelated acts of violence abroad—such as the recent attack at Bondi Beach in Australia—instrumentalise tragedy by retroactively folding it into domestic political debates to which it bears no demonstrable connection. Such conflations may be understood as discursive moves that seek to derive political advantage from acts of terrorism, with chilling implications for lawful political expression.

4.5 From an academic perspective, such conflations are deeply problematic. Western public order jurisprudence has consistently emphasised that meaning is not derived from abstract literalism or hypothetical offence, but from speaker intent, historical context and social usage (Butler 1997; Barendt 2005). To interpret *intifada* in isolation from these factors—let alone to treat it as a proxy for terrorism—is to misrepresent both its semantic history and its communicative function within the UK protest environment. More broadly, such approaches risk eroding the robust protections afforded to political speech in a democratic society, where the threshold for restriction must remain high precisely to prevent the securitisation of dissent and the gradual contraction of free expression under the guise of public safety.

5. Concluding Opinion: Should it be banned?

5.1 *Intifada* is not, in itself, an inherently threatening or violent term. Linguistically and historically, it denotes a political uprising or movement of resistance and does not, on its face, target any racial, religious or protected group. Its semantic meaning and historical usage preclude any presumption that the term is intrinsically hostile, antisemitic or criminal.

5.2 In the context of contemporary pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the United Kingdom, the available evidence indicates that the term is deployed as part of a broader political discourse concerned with opposition to military occupation, structural injustice and the denial of self-determination. Protest materials, chant framing, organisers' public statements and participant testimony consistently point to an intention to express political solidarity and dissent, rather than to threaten, abuse or incite hatred against any community.

- 5.3 Crucially, there is no evidential basis for treating references to *intifada* in these contexts as encouragement of terrorism or violence. Academic analysis demonstrates that attempts to conflate the term with jihadist violence represent a category error that collapses distinct political, historical and ideological phenomena.
- 5.4 The interpretation of the term as inherently antisemitic likewise cannot be sustained without abstracting it from its linguistic meaning, historical plurality and social context. The participation of Jewish individuals and organisations in these demonstrations, and their explicit rejection of antisemitic readings of the term as used, further reinforces the conclusion that its communicative function in UK protest settings is political rather than racial or religious.
- 5.5 On this basis, and consistent with established principles of UK public order jurisprudence, the use of the term *intifada* in the circumstances examined falls within the domain of lawful political expression that democratic societies have traditionally sought to protect. To construe it otherwise would require a decontextualised and speculative reading of political speech, with significant chilling implications for freedom of expression and the legitimate articulation of dissent.

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