

What's in a name?



by Nikos Akritas

The recent suspension of Home Office staff over the defacement of a birth certificate containing the word Israel is symptomatic of the growing antisemitism in Western countries. Not only are Jews being increasingly dehumanized in particular circles, it now seems they are fair game for unabashed discrimination and thuggery. A certain pathological society of the 1930s comes to mind and it seems the lessons of the last eighty years are being forgotten or ignored. All abominations begin somewhere and recent events tell us we are a good deal beyond beginnings.

An unwillingness to clamp down strongly on vehement Jew hatred has demonstrated, time and again, where it leads. With one mainstream political party uncovering antisemites under every stone and the other afraid to 'offend' minorities where

antisemitism is rife, it is small wonder chants openly calling for genocide haunt Britain's streets. Calls on, and by, politicians to support a ceasefire in Gaza is the road to appeasement, allowing a brutal regime to continue functioning. To hark back, once again, to eighty years ago, why, when it was clear the National Socialists ruling Germany had been defeated in Europe, was it necessary to occupy that country and root out its leaders? The same reasons apply now; different geography, different ideology, same violent hatred.

The only other region of the globe where antisemitism is so publicly flaunted and widespread is the Arab world. Many Arab countries place prohibitions on what can appear in printed form. These include, but are not limited to, mention or representation of fairies (although djinn are mentioned in the Koran), magic (although djinn practise magic), the consumption of pork (reference to pigs is ok in some), the Persian Gulf (it is the Arabian Gulf) and that six letter word – Israel! Consequently, books on myths and legends are not allowed in schools and anything with the words *Persian Gulf* and *Israel* must be expunged. Any globes, atlases and texts that use *Persian Gulf*, have *Persian* scratched out to be replaced with *Arabian*.

As for the word *Israel*, this must be completely removed and so school globes have the country name blacked over with marker, as is the case with atlases. Any page which contains a paragraph about Israel must be torn out of the book. This has the additional consequence that anyone reading the book also loses out on information they were researching which had nothing to do with Israel, because the page they needed happened to be shared by the offending word. When I (very recently) taught in this region of the world, a biography of Einstein had to have the six letter word blacked out and so did, rather ironically, a *government produced* textbook book which praised the actions of one particular individual for supporting the war effort against 'blank'.

It is impossible for any school to know when this word will pop up in a text unless it is in an obvious place, such as an atlas, and so on occasion children would come across it and show it to me. My first such experience involved a commotion coming from some of the students in my class. I went over to investigate what was going on. A couple of them claimed with wild excitement that a book another student was reading was illegal. I asked what made them think so and they informed me it had *the word* in it. When I inquired into which word they replied, "The 'I' word!" I inspected the book, saw *the 'I' word*, and sighed.

On another occasion, a student asked why *the 'I' word* was banned. I explained it was due to politics and, as expected, another asked for details. I knew providing further answers would only get me into trouble but at the same time felt it important to give the students an explanation. Unfortunately, I told them, I was not allowed to teach about this specific topic. This only intrigued them further and I now had the undivided attention of the whole class. The children pressed me as to why I was not allowed to teach about this topic. I explained it was not on the syllabus but that they could ask their parents and do their own personal research at home, knowing that leaving it like this many of them would.

When we unexpectedly came across *the 'I' word* in the government-provided textbook, one of the brighter students, who was reading aloud to the class, nonchalantly replaced *Israel* with, "The place that shall not be mentioned," even though we had yet to expunge the word. It caused a huge amount of laughter and we made a big deal, almost pantomime-like, of quickly distributing the class markers so we could all black out the offending word at the same time. I felt it my duty to inform the school management, and the government department distributing the book to all schools in the country, of the serious oversight. Surprisingly, neither of them responded to my communications.

When the government of a country goes to such extreme lengths, redacting all references to a state it harbours ill feeling toward, and the rulers of that same country are bidding to take ownership of a national newspaper in the UK – where a mainstream party is riddled with antisemites and government employees erase the name of that same state on official documents – an ill wind bloweth indeed.

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