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“You’re Good as Long as You’re Silent” Anti-Palestinian Racism in Schooling

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Abstract

In this article, we re/present our research alongside Palestinian Muslim students and families in Alberta, focusing on research participants’ experiences of anti-Palestinian racism in k-12 schooling. To contextualize participants’ experiences, we explore literature around anti-Palestinian racism across Canadian and Israeli settler-colonial contexts. We elucidate two main narrative threads reverberating across research participants’ stories: participants experience(d) systemic anti-Palestinian racism in schools; yet they simultaneously engage(d) in education about Palestine in their homes and communities. Discussing ongoing anti-Palestinian racism in Canada, we conclude by offering several considerations and actions towards countering anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian schooling.



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“My Mom brought me a keffiyeh for school for cultural day ... this guy took it out of my backpack and put it on his head and covered his whole face except for his eyes and started calling himself a ‘terrorist’ ... the teachers didn’t do anything.” ~ Bisan

“Adam had to do a project about ‘a recent conflict’ in an area, and he said, ‘Palestine.’ The teacher said, ‘No ... I need to be able to find it on a current political map.’ That was her reasoning. And he was like, ‘No. That is who I am and that’s what I want to talk about.’” ~ Yafa

Readers could assume that the above experiences of anti-Palestinian racism in schooling were expressed during the Israeli settler-colonial regime’s October 2023—ongoing¹ genocide in Gaza (Sultany, 2024; UN OHCHR, 2025) and intensifying colonial violence across Palestine (al-Botmeh et al., 2024; UN OHCHR, 2026). However, Bisan and Yafa² shared these experiences in November 2022 (Yafa) and March 2023 (Bisan) during our research alongside Palestinian Muslim students and families.

In this article, we re/present our research³, focusing on research participants’ experiences of anti-Palestinian racism in k-12 schooling. To contextualize participants’ experiences, we begin by exploring literature around anti-Palestinian racism across Canadian and Israeli settler-colonial contexts. We then elucidate two main narrative threads that reverberated across participants’ stories. Discussing ongoing anti-Palestinian racism in Canada, we conclude by offering several considerations and actions towards countering anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian schooling.

Our Research Alongside Palestinian Muslim Students and Families

Our research involved narratively inquiring alongside Palestinian Muslim students and families into their curriculum-making (Huber et al., 2011) experiences across familial, community, and k-12 schooling contexts in Alberta. As both phenomenon and methodology, narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013) is well-suited for research alongside Palestinian children, youth, and families because Palestinians have historically, and continue to, transmit knowledge, culture, and memory through oral histories and narratives (see: Abdo & Masalha, 2018; Albatta, 2020; Kassem, 2011; Saleh, 2025; Sayigh, 2020).

Drawing upon Lugones’ (1987) discussion of “world”-travel,⁴ and Aoki’s (2005) view of curriculum as *lived* alongside students (rather than ‘delivered’ to them), Huber et al. (2011) conceptualized curriculum as composed within school *and* familial curriculum-making worlds. Because schools are often privileged as the only site of ‘education,’ we chose to inquire alongside research participants into their experiences of curriculum-making across schooling and familial/community contexts. However, we distinguish between the terms ‘schooling’ and ‘education.’ For us, ‘schooling’ more accurately describes the process of imposing hegemonic narratives, including “beliefs and cultural values of White, Western European, protestant,

¹ While ‘Phase 1’ of a ‘ceasefire’ commenced on October 10, 2025, the Israeli regime’s genocidal violence continues (Abo Helow, 2026; Hajjaj, 2025).

² Pseudonyms.

³ This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

⁴ A “world,” Lugones (1987) asserted, “need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society ... some ‘worlds’ are bigger than others” (p. 10). Lugones argued that we travel across “worlds” with varying dis/ease because of how we are constructed in different “worlds.”

heterosexual, able-bodied cis-gendered males as the normative standard” (Stovall, 2018, p. 52), to maintain inequitable power structures. ‘Education,’ however, involves onto-epistemological and relational engagements with beings, places, and texts over time (Saleh, 2024).

With the support of Palestinian community members, Muna invited participants to this research following institutional ethics approval in July 2022. Between October 2022 and June 2023, Muna engaged in multiple (recorded and transcribed) individual and group research conversations with research participants⁵:

- Jenin (18), Yassin (16), and their parents, Mahmoud and Hannah. Jenin and Yassin attended the same K-9 Islamic school and public high school. Mahmoud and Hannah attended k-12 public schools.
- Best friends Bisan (18), Suha (18), and Eman (18), and Bisan’s mother, Hiba. Bisan attended k-12 Catholic schools and moved to a public high school in grade 12. Suha attended k-12 public schools. Eman attended a K-9 Islamic school and a public high school. Hiba attended k-12 schools in Jordan.
- Othman (17), Hussein (14), Ali (13), Adam (9), and their mother, Yafa. Yafa and her children all attend(ed) k-12 public schools. Othman, Hussein, Ali, and Adam attended K-9 Arabic-English bilingual public schools.
- Aminah, a mother of two recently-graduated high school students: Aminah attended k-12 public schools and two years of high school in the West Bank, Palestine. Aminah’s children attended both Islamic and public schools.

From January to May 2024, we engaged in an extensive literature and media review, focusing on anti-Palestinian racism in Canada. Iteratively and narratively collecting and analyzing field texts (Saleh, 2019), we identified two main narrative threads reverberating across research participants’ stories: participants experience(d) systemic anti-Palestinian racism in schools; yet they simultaneously engage(d) in education about Palestine in their homes and communities. Before re/presenting participants’ experiences of anti-Palestinian racism in schooling, we believe it is important to contextualize their experiences with an exploration of literature around anti-Palestinian racism.

Anti-Palestinian Racism

Following Majid (2022), we understand anti-Palestinian racism as “a form of anti-Arab racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames or dehumanizes Palestinians or their narratives” (p. ii). Situating her report for the Arab Canadian Lawyers' Association (ACLA) by making connections to Black and Indigenous movements against racism and settler-colonialism, Majid identified multiple forms of anti-Palestinian racism, including:

- denying the Nakba;
- justifying violence against Palestinians;
- failing to acknowledge Palestinians as an Indigenous people;
- erasing the human dignity of Palestinians;

⁵ Pseudonyms are used for participants who, unless otherwise specified, attended schools in urban Alberta.

- excluding (or pressuring others to exclude) the presence and/or perspectives of Palestinians and allies;
- defaming Palestinians and allies with slander such as being inherently antisemitic and/or a terrorist threat/sympathizer. (pp. 18-20)

Anti-Palestinian racism in the form of Nakba denialism involves eliding the Nakba ('The Catastrophe'), the Arabic term used to refer to the elimination, eviction, displacement, and dispossession of Palestinians by Zionist forces during the settler-colonial creation of Israel in 1948. Between 1947 and 1949, more than 750,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from Palestine (see: Khalidi, 2020; Pappé, 2006; Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007). However, as Eghbariah (2024) asserted, rather than an event, the Nakba is an ongoing *structure* of Zionist settler-colonialism, a "Nakba regime" that encompasses genocide, apartheid, and occupation with "displacement as Nakba's foundational violence, fragmentation as its structure, and the denial of self-determination as its purpose" (p. 897).

While named as a distinct form of racism relatively recently, anti-Palestinian racism is not new. Scholars have been theorizing and studying racism against Palestinians for decades (Ayyash, 2022) and are continuing to map interconnections and distinctions between anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim racism (often referred to as Islamophobia). This work is vital as Palestinians of all faiths are often erased by mythologies that misrepresent modern Zionist settler-colonization of Palestine as an ancient religious 'conflict' (Masalha, 2023)⁶. Similar to how Islamophobia can be experienced by anyone racialized as Muslim (Garner & Selod, 2015), anti-Palestinian racism can be experienced by those perceived to be Palestinian and supporters of Palestinian liberation (Majid, 2022). While interconnected with anti-Muslim racism, recognizing anti-Palestinian racism as a distinct phenomenon is important for use in policymaking, legal cases, advocacy, and activism (Majid, 2022). Further, situating anti-Palestinian racism within the framework of racialization renders intelligible political and material realities (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2023).

Anti-Palestinian Racism Across Settler-Colonial Geographies

Racism is foundational to settler-colonialism and settler-colonialism is foundational to racism in (what are colonially known as) Canada and Israel (see: Yellowhead Institute, 2024). Understanding anti-Palestinian racism thus requires an analysis of what it means and how it works across these settler-colonial contexts, and how these different meanings and workings reinforce and interact with each other. This is particularly important to emphasize as we, and research participants, are settlers on these colonized lands.

Racism can be understood as a process and product of racialization in which a group of people is constructed as "Other," with certain assigned biological-phenotypical and/or cultural markers, as opposed to a constructed "Us" that must be purified and saved from the Other (Carr, 2016; Miles & Brown, 2003). Racism, as an ideology and system of discriminatory practices, is a socially and historically specific process (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2023; Carr, 2016; Fredrickson, 2009). Racism (including anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia, and antisemitism) operates at

⁶ However, as Abdou (2024) stressed, racial-religious supremacy has always driven North American and Zionist settler-colonialism.

local and global levels, changing its meaning and function in different (settler-colonial) contexts (see: Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2022; Bakan, & Abu-Laban, 2024; Shaw, 2015).

For decades, Sayegh (1965/2012) and other Palestinian scholars⁷ have named North American settler-colonialism “as a precursor and complementary to Zionist settlement” (Salaita, 2016, p. 136). Central to settler-colonialism is territoriality through its “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 387). Rather than an event, Wolfe (2006) asserted, settler-colonialism is a *structure* that seeks to eliminate Indigenous peoples; this “structural genocide” (p. 403) includes removal, restricting movement, assimilation, and mass killing of Indigenous peoples. Settler-colonialism is distinct from other forms of colonialism as settlers make a home on colonized lands, insisting on “settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Importantly, Kauanui (2016) asserted that while the “operative logic of settler colonialism may be to ‘eliminate the native’ ... indigenous peoples exist, resist, and persist” (para. 1).

While Israeli and Canadian settler-colonial regimes uphold each other, their contexts and histories are different (Gabriel, 2023; Krebs & Olwan, 2012). Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2014) outlined how, through racial-religious justifications, European colonial powers and Zionist ideology have not only evicted Palestinians from their lands, but from history and humanity. By constructing Palestinians as “present-absentees,” “security threats,” and “demographic threats” (p. 278), the Israeli regime simultaneously absents Palestinians, eliding their historical and ongoing oppression and demands of sovereignty, who are only “present insofar as they threaten the ‘security’ and racial purity of the Jewish state” (p. 288). Mbembe (2003) argued that Israeli settler-colonialism can be understood through what he conceptualized as necropower and the necropolitical creation of “deathworlds” for Othered populations “subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (p. 40). Zionist settler-colonialism of Palestine not only enables the creation of “deathworlds” for Palestinians, but they are essential to its necropolitical survival.

Anti-Palestinian racism in the Israeli settler-colonial context interacts with and reinforces anti-Palestinian racism in the Canadian settle-colonial context. Bakan and Abu-Laban (2024) referred to this as “the Israel/Palestine racial contract,” a system of material conditions and ideological justifications in service of Western alliance with the Israeli regime, “rendering Palestinians as stateless non-white victims in historic land and in Western countries” (p. 109). El-Sherif (2023) traced how Canada has long played a role in the Zionist settler-colonization of Palestine and oppression of Palestinians, including: supporting the partition of Palestine, “peacekeeping” (i.e., securing colonial and imperial power), supplying arms, direct military involvement, and vilifying critics of Israel. Ayyash (2022) argued, “predicated on the Israeli settler colonial project’s ‘purification’ of the land from the toxic Palestinian body” (p. 962), the distinctive feature of anti-Palestinian racism in the Euro-West is the toxification and racialized expulsion of the Palestinian critique of Zionism/Israel from the realm of “rational” discourse.

Overlapping with what we understand as anti-Palestinian racism, Ziadah (2017) and Carr (2016) explored anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism in Western and Canadian contexts. As Carr (2016) argued, neoliberal expansionist Western states benefit, economically and geopolitically, from Othering Muslimness (as monolithic, atavist, terroristic, misogynist), evidenced in the so-called “war on terror,” through the “politics of fear to justify war and violation of civil liberties domestically” (p. 46). In neoliberal racial capitalism (Eid & Clarno, 2017), states require skilled and cheap labor, often provided by im/migrants; however, they simultaneously assert regulatory

⁷ See: Barakat, (2018); Salamanca et al. (2012).

control over these populations through assimilative policies. For example, Ziadah (2017) outlined how Canada depoliticizes Arab and Palestinian advocacy groups into NGOs, placing them in neoliberal competition for state funding, then uses (the threat of) funding cuts to discipline/silence dissent about domestic and foreign policies.

Like states, media and far-right groups play a role in Othering/vilifying Arabs and Muslims to further their interests (Hasan, 2021; Zine 2022). Zine (2022) outlined how the “Islamophobia industry” (p. 24) manufactures and instrumentalizes fear and hatred of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians (often constructed as synonymous). Zine clarified that the Islamophobia industry operates through a network of (social) media outlets, influencers, white nationalist groups, Zionist and Israeli lobby groups, and so-called security experts and philanthropic organizations (pp. 24–26). Zine (2023) asserted that the constant repetition of dehumanizing Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian tropes, alongside misinformation and disinformation, in media and politics has served to justify violence and oppression against Palestinians and Muslims.

Anti-Palestinian Racism and (Zionist) Settler-Colonial Logics

Analyzing the literature, and resonating across participants’ stories, we identified three interconnected (Zionist) settler-colonial logics central to, and driving, anti-Palestinian racism: Zionist mythologies, dehumanization, and denialism.

Zionist mythologies. Said (1979) argued that mythologies, alongside the dehumanization of Palestinians and denial of their oppression, are central to Zionist settler-colonialism and have become so institutionalized in the West that “even the assertion of Palestinian identity therefore takes on the form of a political challenge” (p. 14). Pappé (2017) asserted that Zionist mythologies “will continue to provide an immunity shield for the present inhuman regime in the land of Palestine” if they continue to be regarded as incontrovertible truth (p. 14).

Pappé (2017) repudiated pervasive mythologies, including: equating Zionism with Judaism; denying that Zionism is colonialism; and storying Palestine as an empty land ... while simultaneously asserting that Palestinians voluntarily left their homeland in 1948. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2014) outlined, European Zionists in the late-1800s and early-1900s were aware of inhabitants in Palestine, but “simply did not recognize them as *a people*” (p. 278). Said (1979) countered foundational mythologies by tracing how, during the late-19th century period of Euro-Western colonial expansion, “Zionism *never* spoke of itself unambiguously as a Jewish liberation movement, but rather as a Jewish movement for colonial settlement in the Orient⁸” (p. 23). For example, the founder of modern political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, wrote that the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine would be “a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism” (cited in Eghbariah, 2024, p. 909). Asserting that Zionism is a form of racism,⁹ Erakat (2021) stressed, “Israel did not *become* a discriminatory regime but is *defined* by such discrimination” (para. 3). Moreover, similar to Said’s (1979) discussion of Zionism as racist settler-colonial *praxis* against Palestinians, Eghbariah (2024) asserted that Zionism must be understood “in terms of the Nakba it produced” (p. 896).

⁸ Said (1979) explained that “everything to the east of an imaginary line drawn somewhere between Greece and Turkey was called the Orient” (p. 7).

⁹ See also: Khalidi (1992).

Dehumanization. Said (1978) conceptualized ‘Orientalism’ to describe the white supremacist, colonial, and imperial Euro-West’s Othering depictions and misrepresentations of ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Oriental.’ He contended,

Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world’s resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being. (p. 108)

Said (1979) argued that Zionist settler-colonialism is undergirded and driven by Othering Palestinians as “outlandish, strange, hostile Orientals” (p. 25), “to be opposed, managed, or pacified” (p. 17), because “they” are “backward and uncivilized” (p. 26) and “synonymous with everything degraded, fearsome, irrational, and brutal” (p. 33). Said asserted, “Above all, the native Arab had to be seen as an irremediable opposite, something like a combination of savage and superhuman ... a being with whom it is impossible (and useless) to come to terms” (p. 35).

Said (1984) further outlined how the systematic weaponization “of the rubric ‘terrorists’” by Israeli officials “made it possible for them to use phrases like ‘terrorist nests,’ ‘cancerous growth,’ and ‘two-legged beasts’ in order to bomb refugee camps” (p. 37). Forty years later, this dehumanizing strategy is clear in the Israeli regime’s most recent genocide of Palestinians, evidenced by scores of dehumanizing statements (Law for Palestine, 2024), including:

- Defense Minister Yoav Gallant: “We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly.”
- Minister of Education Yoav Kisch: “Those are animals, they have no right to exist. I am not debating the way it will happen, but they need to be exterminated.”
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: “This is a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle.”

This historical and ongoing dehumanization includes what Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2021) conceptualizes as the unchilding of Palestinian children. She argued that Zionist settler-colonialism evicts Palestinian children from childhood by constructing them “as dangerous, racialized others” (p. 490), enabling “a complex machinery of violence against children, including imprisonment, injuries, loss, trauma, and militarized political occupation” (p. 491). Unchilding of Palestinian children is transparent in the Zionist regime’s genocide and in Western media coverage (Hawari, 2024). For example, a CNN anchor described Hind Rajab, a six-year-old Palestinian child murdered¹⁰ by an Israeli tank gunner in Gaza, as a “woman” (Mahdawi, 2024). Western media has played an active role in the dehumanization of Palestinians for decades (see: Buttu, 2014; Shaheen, 2003), including, as Mikdashi (2014) argued, coverage of “massified” Palestinian “womenandchildren” (para. 2), “mourned only in spectacles of violence” (para. 10), while Palestinian men are dehumanized as “always already dangerous” (para. 2) and unmournable.

¹⁰ On January 29, 2023, Hind was in a car with her aunt, uncle, and two cousins when it was targeted by Israeli forces. In a widely-shared audio-recording, Hind called the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) while trapped in the car with the bodies of her murdered family. At close proximity (making it unlikely that they were not seen), the tank gunner fired 355 bullets on the car, killing Hind and two PRCS medics trying to rescue her (News Desk, 2024).

Denialism. Scholars shaping conceptualizations of anti-Palestinian racism have highlighted pervasive denialism of the racism and (Orientalist) dehumanization Palestinians experience (see: Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2022; Ayyash, 2022; Majid, 2022; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014). This includes denying the historical and ongoing oppression of Palestinians (while simultaneously blaming Palestinians for their own oppression) (Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2022) and denying that Palestinians *exist* as a peoples (Said, 1979; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014).

Scholars have traced this pervasive denialism to its roots and form in the Israeli settler-colonial project. Said (1979) asserted that Zionist settler-colonialism is “built upon a total denial of Palestinian presence” (p. 51). Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2014) argued that “the Palestinian absence from humanity” (p. 279) embedded in Euro-Western racial colonial logics is foundational to Zionist settler-colonialism. Hamdi (2024) outlined how, faced with ongoing Palestinian resistance to Zionist settler-colonialism, dehumanization, and denialism, the Israeli regime attempts to maintain Jewish ethno-religious superiority by limiting Palestinian population growth through “repeated nakbas of the Palestinian people” (p. 13).

Through the concept of racial gaslighting, Abu-Laban and Bakan (2022) argued that anti-Palestinian racism involves denial of racist ideology/practices through “various forms of coding to hide divisive, undemocratic practices of exclusion in an age where overt racism is considered ideologically distasteful” (p. 144). Often referred to as ‘the Palestine exception,’ denialism also includes deeming Palestine and Palestinians’ experiences of racism/oppression as too ‘controversial,’ ‘political,’ or ‘complicated’ to name/discuss (Majid, 2022), including by self-professed ‘progressives’ (Hill & Plitnick, 2021).

Importantly, Ayyash (2022, 2023) asserted that not only is anti-Palestinian racism denied, *but it is also increasingly being perpetuated in the name of anti-racism*. In an interview with Appel (2024), Sealy-Harrington described this “racist anti-racism” as “claiming the mantle of racial justice, while perpetuating racial injustice” (para. 49). Many authors highlighted this in the weaponization of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism against Palestinians and supporters (Gaudet, 2020; Nestel & Gaudet, 2022), specifically though the IHRA’s “illustrative examples” which position essential critiques of Israel/Zionism as antisemitic (Ayyash, 2022). Authors also highlighted widespread censorship and reprisals against supporters of the Palestinian campaign for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) (Ayyash, 2021, 2022; Nestel & Gaudet, 2022; Salaita, 2016). Ayyash (2022) noted how, often in the name of anti-racism, Palestinians and supporters of Palestinian liberation (including BDS-supporters and critics of the IHRA definition) are smeared as “antisemitic terrorist sympathizers” (p. 959). The weaponization of anti-racism (including language around safety/harm) against Palestinians not only denies the difference between colonizer/colonized and oppressor/oppressed, as Abdel-Fattah (2023) asserted, it actually *inverts* this power dynamic.

Anti-Palestinian Racism in North American Schooling

While anti-Palestinian racism in k-12 Canadian schooling is under-researched, there is important work around Palestine and the experiences of Palestinian students in North American schooling. Drawing from community consultations and surveys, Majid (2022) argued that Palestinians experience anti-Palestinian racism “from their time in school, and through the course of their education and careers” (p. 16). Although Abu El-Haj (2015) did not name anti-Palestinian racism in her work, she explored the schooling experiences of Palestinian American youth

navigating transnational social fields and found that youth participants experienced racialized Othering, including in schools, through being “continually cast as suspicious enemy aliens to be feared and disciplined” (p. 206). Shatara (2022) explored (the erasure of) Palestinians and Palestine in social studies research and U.S. state education standards. While we were unable to locate empirical studies on anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian k-12 schooling,¹¹ Elbardouh (2024) named erasures and curricular violence against Palestinian students in Canadian schools as anti-Palestinian racism and asserted that this must be countered. Our discussion of narrative threads in the next section builds from this work to re/present participants’ experiences with anti-Palestinian racism in k-12 schooling in the Canadian context.

Narrative Threads Re/Presented Through Participants’ Experiences

Re/presenting research participants’ experiences, we elucidate two main narrative threads that reverberated across participants’ stories: participants experience(d) systemic anti-Palestinian racism in schools, yet they simultaneously engage(d) in teaching and learning about Palestine in their homes and communities. These threads are interconnected and woven across geographies and generations; for example, parent participants experienced anti-Palestinian racism in schools *and* engaged in familial curriculum-making about Palestine as parents *and* as students.

Our narrative analysis revealed that participants experience(d) systemic anti-Palestinian racism in schools through an entangled combination of: silences and exclusions; censorship and repression; colonial mythologies and erasures; and dehumanization.

Silences and Exclusions

Participants’ stories revealed that the main way they experience(d) anti-Palestinian racism in schools is through pervasive silences and exclusions whereby Palestine and Palestinians are not named, or *if* named, education or discussion about Palestine is elided. This was underscored in every research conversation — including by student participants attending Islamic or Arabic-English bilingual schools.

Student participants discussed silences/exclusions around Palestine in schooling, including in social studies classes and discussions around current events, even when Palestine was in the news. In their group conversation, Othman, Hussein, Ali, and Adam agreed that Palestine was typically only named when students brought it up and that they were never educated about Palestine in school. Othman said that although he and his brothers attend(ed) K-9 Arabic-English bilingual public schools, they “have to explain ‘this is our culture’ because we’re from Falasteen [Palestine] ... so you’re teaching the teacher, other students, and the class.” An exception to this was when a Palestinian teacher read a children’s book featuring Palestine in Ali’s grade 3 Arabic language class.

Bisan said that, in her Catholic elementary school, Palestine was named as the birthplace of Jesus in old textbooks (renamed as Israel in newer textbooks); however, Palestine was only referred to as an ancient - rather than ongoing - place and never discussed in depth. Jenin and Yassin discussed how Palestine was never mentioned in their public high school, and although

¹¹ With the exception of another article that two authors of this paper published about this research (Saleh & Awwad, 2024).

Palestine was named in their K-9 Islamic school, it was during culture days or duaa¹² for Palestine during communal prayers (typically when Israel bombed Gaza), but didn't include education. Eman similarly said there was no education around Palestine in her K-9 Islamic school, and that in her public high school, Palestine was only named in lists of global conflicts, "like 'the Israel-Palestine conflict' and then on to the next conflict ... [but] that only happened literally once, twice max, they never actually *talked* about it."

Parent participants revealed that these silences/exclusions are not new. Hannah, Mahmoud, Aminah, and Yafa all said they didn't learn about Palestine in their k-12 public schools. Hannah clarified, "the 'Arab-Israeli War' was mentioned here and there, but not Palestine." Hiba said that, in her schooling in Jordan, there were exclusions and strict boundaries around discussions about Palestine. The only exception was Aminah, who said she was taught about Palestine when she attended high school for two years in the West Bank, Palestine.

Some participants discussed potential reasons behind these silences/exclusions. Indicating his awareness of recriminations around support for Palestine (see: Majid, 2022; Nestel & Gaudet, 2022), Othman suggested teachers' fears of negative repercussions: "I think the teachers learned if they were to say something or speak up against it, then it would go farther than just the classroom." Ali agreed, stating, "Teachers don't want to talk because they don't want to say anything wrong." Bisan, Eman, and Suha discussed how this status quo of silence can encourage students, including Palestinian students, to self-censor; Suha explained, "especially when you're young, you might want to fit in [and] shy away from [talking about] it."

Participants' stories collectively underscored Yassin's assertion that, in schools, "there's really no educating on the topic of Palestine." Agreeing with Yassin, Mahmoud shared, "I just want our narrative to be taught in school ... you can't solve the injustices of today without educating people about the past, what happened and how we got here." Hannah added, "In a perfect world, our schools would be teaching our kids the history of Palestine ... just tell the truth, nothing more. Just tell what happened."

Censorship and Repression

Participants' stories highlighted that many of them experience(d) silencing through censorship and/or repression when disrupting silences and exclusions around Palestine. Student participants experienced this mainly through teachers or administrators shutting down their attempts to discuss Palestine.

As Yafa's quote at the beginning of this article highlights, Adam's teacher attempted to stop him from focusing on Palestine for a school project because it's not on "a current political map." Disturbingly, Yafa shared that her sons all had teachers who (attempted to) prevent them from focusing on Palestine for relevant school assignments, often by citing the (colonial) erasure of Palestine in (Western) maps. Yafa said she explained Israel's settler-colonization of Palestine to these teachers and named their actions as harmful, however, "I don't think [they] even understood how damaging that can be." Underscoring the embodied toll of racism, Yafa said that she's typically "hyper-vigilant" as a Palestinian Muslim parent, but "let [her] guard down" in her children's Arabic-English bilingual public schools (of primarily Arab and Muslim students):

¹² An Arabic word signifying supplication/prayer.

You don't expect that [racism], and that's the hardest part. I let my guard down. You're not as hyper-vigilant as other places ... and why should my kid have to have his guard up all the time? ... we had a good conversation, me and my kids, we talked about it. [I said,] "Stand up for yourself. Say something. Don't let it go."

Yafa later shared that, during Israel's May 2021 war on Gaza, her friend who is also a teacher, said that the public-school board emailed teachers and administrators to avoid discussions around "the conflict." Yafa asserted that avoiding or preventing education about Palestine is inexcusable, "especially when you're at [school]. They're all Arabs. This is affecting them."

Noting that her public high school is mainly attended by Muslim students, Jenin shared her experience of being censored by a school administrator during Israel's May 2021 war on Gaza. A member of the student leadership group that regularly raised awareness about local and global in/justice, Jenin advocated for education about Palestine and support for Palestinians in Gaza, asking a school administrator, "Is there anything we can do? Like even a fundraiser? ... Can we at least just post posters about it so students can learn about what's going on?" However, Jenin said the administrator "straight up told me, 'No, you're not allowed.'" Calling her school's censorship of Palestine "hypocritical" compared to their vocal support for Ukraine, Jenin also compared how the administrator silenced her on Palestine, but encouraged her to highlight being Muslim in a scholarship application:

I'm like, "You're telling me that in the scholarship you want me to talk about my identity and how I'm a proud Muslim ... [but] I'm also proud to be Palestinian and that's something that's very important to me, but you're not letting me express that here in the school." It made me really angry It's like we're not even allowed to be Palestinian.

Hiba's stories highlighted that experiences of censorship and repression in schooling could be intergenerational and transnational. Discussing her schooling experiences in Jordan, Hiba shared that there were parameters around what she could say/do as a Palestinian, "and I didn't want that for my kids. I want them to be treated fairly, not discriminated against just because of who they are." Resonating with our discussion of denialism and racial gaslighting, Hiba said she was hopeful when arriving in Canada, but soon learned that, as a Palestinian, "you're good as long as you're silent."

Colonial Mythologies and Erasures

Participants also experienced anti-Palestinian racism through (Zionist settler-)colonial mythologies and erasures whereby the Nakba, settler-colonization of Palestine, historical and ongoing oppression of Palestinians, and sometimes the very existence of Palestine are denied.

Jenin discussed how, not only did an administrator censor her attempts to educate about Palestine or fundraise to support Palestinians during Israel's May 2021 war on Gaza, but the school's Instagram account also instead posted a message that erased Zionist settler-colonial violence by obscurely referring to "the conflict" and how "we don't choose sides." Jenin explained how she challenged the administrator about this post, saying "you're making it seem like there are two fair sides to choose between, when there's literally kids dying and they're bombing the land and it's not a fair 50/50 thing." Reminiscent of our discussion of racist anti-racism, the administrator replied, "we understand that you feel strongly about this, but we're not going to

choose sides and we don't want anyone bullying anyone.” Jenin expressed her frustrations at this response:

Like obviously we're not going to bully anyone, but the fact that they just tried to make the events going on in Falasteen [Palestine] so insignificant ... it really made me upset, her excuses and her explanation of why they did that ... that was the first time I experienced something like that about being Palestinian, where I had to actually push and be like, “Why are you putting us down this way?”

Bisan asserted that Palestine was “eliminated out of the curriculum” in her k-12 Catholic schooling, saying, “I’ve seen the textbooks change with my own eyes” from “Jesus was born in Palestine” to “all of a sudden there was Israel instead.” Reminiscent of Said’s (1979) argument that Palestinians’ experiences of Zionist settler-colonialism must be centered, Bisan stated: “It was like they eliminated Palestine completely ... like we can't say Palestine exists because that will offend Israelis. They never thought about how Palestinians feel.”

Along with her children’s teachers excusing their attempts to censor Palestine because of colonial erasures, Yafa shared a story of egregious anti-Palestinian racism by Othman’s grade 8 teacher, who denied the very existence of Palestine:

We had just come back from Palestine and [Othman’s] teacher asked the students, “Who was somewhere that is humid?” Othman said, “I’ve just come back.” [She asked,] “Oh from where?” [He responded,] “I was in Palestine.” The teacher said, ““Oh! That doesn’t even exist.” He was in grade 8. He was upset.

Yafa described how, following her initial conversation with the teacher, who “said there was a misunderstanding,” it became clear this was a pattern of racist colonial erasure by the teacher:

But then this happened again with the same teacher when my son said, “I’m Palestinian” and the teacher said, “There’s no such thing as that place.” At that point, I called the teacher and said, “This wasn’t the first or second time. I’m letting you know I’m taking this further.” So, I did go to the principal, who was good. He said this isn’t acceptable and was going to have a conversation with the teacher, [but] she was hard to deal with after that ... I think she knew what she was doing.

Dehumanization

As emphasized in our exploration of the literature, dehumanization isn’t only a *form* of anti-Palestinian racism, but *undergirds and drives it*. Evident in many of the stories already highlighted, participants experience(d) anti-Palestinian racism through dehumanizing (Orientalist) language, framings, stereotypes, smears, and gaslighting.

Parent participants underscored that experiences of dehumanization in schooling are not new. Reminiscent of Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s (2014) discussion of the Zionist regime’s construction of Palestinians as “present-absentees” (p. 278), Hannah shared how, because of school silences and media vilification of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians where “we were always reflected as ‘terrorists’ ... you were always kind of on the defense or trying to portray yourself as a normal human, right?” Mahmoud agreed, saying he remembers being acutely aware that teachers and other students watched the same shows/movies he did, where “the ‘terrorist’ was always the Palestinian

guy” because the keffiyeh¹³ that actors wore “was always the Palestinian one.” Yafa recalled biased Western media coverage of both Palestinian Intifadas¹⁴ and said that, while she attended k-12 public schools with significant Arab and Muslim student populations, she sometimes faced demeaning “jokes” about Palestinians “like, ‘oh, you guys are rock-throwers’ ... and these were other Arab kids!” However, Yafa stressed that her children don’t typically experience anti-Palestinian racism from other students, rather, mainly from teachers and administrators.

In addition to Bisan’s experience (shared at the beginning of this article) of teachers’ inaction when another student wrapped a keffiyeh around his head and declared himself a “terrorist,” she discussed how she was “racially profiled” by her high school social studies teacher. The only student participant who shared experiences of anti-Muslim racism in schools, Bisan described how this teacher would regularly harass her with anti-Palestinian and (gendered¹⁵) anti-Muslim racism:

He'd always come to me when I'm with my friends and just say really weird remarks and talk about Israel and Palestine ... like [you have] “no country” jokes ... then he would talk about me being Muslim, [asking] “why don't I wear the hijab?” ... and also saying, “you're the only Falasteeni [Palestinian] here, is it because there's not a lot of you?”

Hiba said that they decided to move Bisan to a public high school in grade 12 because of the administration's inaction to the racism Bisan faced. Pained by Bisan’s questions of “Are we not human beings? Are we not people?” Hiba said that schools exacerbate the racialized trauma Palestinian Muslim students experience, stating, “I think they traumatize our kids even more.”

Participants Experiences of Familial and Community Education

While participants experience(d) systemic anti-Palestinian racism in schooling, they simultaneously engage(d) in familial curriculum-making about Palestine in their homes and communities, including by:

- sharing Palestinian knowledge, history, culture(s), and narratives across geographies and generations;
- individually and collectively resisting silences, censorship, colonial mythologies, and dehumanization;
- advocating for Palestinian liberation in multiple ways, including: leveraging social media; organizing and attending teach-ins, book clubs, rallies, and protests; leading and participating in student-led movements, cultural organizations, and liberation collectives.
- embracing who they are as Palestinians and Muslims.

¹³ The Palestinian keffiyeh is typically a mainly white scarf with a distinctive black pattern. Abu-Ayyash (2024) discussed how the keffiyeh has become a symbol of Palestinian national identity, resistance, and global solidarity.

¹⁴ Arabic for “shaking off,” the 1st Intifada (1987-1993) and 2nd Intifada (2000~2005) were Palestinian uprisings against Israeli settler-colonial violence/oppression.

¹⁵ See Zine’s (2006) discussion of gendered Islamophobia.

Alongside teaching and learning about Zionist settler-colonialism, participants' stories emphasized their intentional familial education around Palestinian culture, history, *sumud*¹⁶, resistance, joy, and love of their land (see: Hamdi, 2024; Sirriyeh, 2024; Zaidan, 2012).

Both Aminah and Yafa discussed how their intergenerational education included regularly re/connecting with family in Palestine. Yafa discussed realizing as a ten-year-old that most of her family was forcibly evicted from Palestine because she lived with her grandmother, a Nakba survivor, in their intergenerational home. She recalled visiting family in Palestine as a child and experiencing its beauty; however, she also experienced demeaning checkpoints and witnessed colonial brutality against family members. Yafa stated, "We talked a lot as a family, we watched the news, Aljazeera, and all that stuff, but you don't really know who you are [as a Palestinian] until you're older." Similarly, Aminah's familial curriculum-making profoundly shapes her and her parenting, particularly living with her grandparents in Palestine for two years as a teenager and experiencing the beauty of Palestinian communal care and joy amidst colonial violence. She asserted, "I think also for our kids, the least we can do is teach them who we are, where you're from, and what's the story behind it."

In her familial curriculum-making, like her parents, Yafa prioritizes visiting with family in Palestine. She expressed gratitude because her children traveled "home to Palestine and met my grandma, [and] listened to her stories." Yafa emphasized that she and her husband continually remind their children to be proud of who they are: "We tell them, 'You are Palestinians. You need to be proud of it.'" As highlighted by Othman's story of "teaching the teacher, other students, and the class," about Palestinian culture, and Adam's refusal to choose another country to focus on for his school project, Yafa's children proudly teach about Palestine and what it means to be Palestinian.

Suha shared that she would attend protests and rallies for Palestine when she was younger, but "didn't completely understand the severity of it ... as I grew older and I learned more, I really got to understand it." Bisan agreed, adding that when encountering "someone who doesn't understand you want to make them understand. And I feel like the older you get, the more connected you get, you know?" Bisan stressed that she didn't know the meaning of the terms antisemitism, Zionism, or apartheid until she learned about them in a Palestinian community group, but "these terms are so important ... and I had to learn them from my own culture, rather than in school where I'm actually supposed to learn." Hiba agreed, stressing the importance of this familial and community education, because Palestinians must be knowledgeable and advocate "to prove a point, or be recognized, or have rights, or *anything*. It always has to be a struggle."

Jenin shared that she "learned the most" about Palestine from her family, including "the Nakba, the art, the historic details and events" and "what it means to be Palestinian." Because of her familial education, Jenin said she's "always speaking out for and being proud of who we are as Palestinians." Yassin agreed, saying that witnessing his dad's continuous learning motivated him to learn more because "it's one of the biggest injustices in the world that isn't acknowledged at all. I had to educate myself and educate others on it too." Yassin stressed that his family in Palestine "want us to just bring it into the light ... what's happening to them is injustice, it's wrong, and if people were aware and cared about it, then it would stop, right?"

¹⁶ Although the Arabic word *sumud* is often translated as 'steadfastness,' Hamdi (2024) argued that "*sumud* carries with it the ideas of a diversity and constancy of resistance acts and positionings" (p. 7).

Like student participants, many parents, including Mahmoud, Aminah, and Yafa, discussed attending protests and rallies for Palestine with their families when they were younger. Mahmoud shared how these “had like five or six people” but have grown in size and regularity. He expressed pride in his children’s knowledge and advocacy, and Hannah agreed, stating, “I’m happy that they’re confident and proud Palestinians and [that] they’re learning more.” Mahmoud expressed his hope that “people are going to realize that everything we’re screaming and protesting for? That’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

Ongoing Anti-Palestinian Racism in Canadian Schooling and Society

Our research confirmed what many Palestinian students and families intimately know: Anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian schooling is systemic in/across classrooms, schools, and school boards through silences/exclusions, censorship/repression, colonial mythologies and erasures, and dehumanization. While most cases of anti-Palestinian racism are unreported (Majid, 2022), let alone publicized, throughout our research we identified several (social) media cases of past and ongoing anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian k-12 schooling, including:

- Dating back to the 1980’s, Cole ([2021](#)) discussed cases of anti-Palestinian racism in Canada’s largest school board, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), including: censoring a book that includes Palestinian children’s diary entries; a student wearing a keffiyeh threatening by a teacher to remove it or leave class; and smearing students who objected to history lessons erasing Palestine as antisemitic.
- April 2019: The Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) posted a picture on Facebook of a banner made by Mississauga high school students for their social justice class that featured the Palestinian flag and referenced testing on Palestinian prisoners. The Peel District School Board (PDSB) [responded](#) by announcing that the banner will be removed and an investigation conducted.
- November 2020: A student-created video about the history and ongoing occupation of Palestine, one of four videos featured in Ontario’s e-Learning curriculum, was [removed](#) by Ontario’s Ministry of Education.
- November 2021: Students at a Toronto high school organized a [walkout](#), calling for an end to anti-Palestinian racism at the TDSB.
- May 2022: Students at an Ottawa Catholic high school organized a [walkout](#), calling for an end to anti-Palestinian discrimination at the school board.
- November 2022: Thames Valley District School Board dress-code guidelines [used](#) a Free Palestine t-shirt as an example of “divisive” clothing that could “promote or incite violence.”
- March 2023: Students at a Halifax K-9 school were [told](#) by school administration to remove their keffiyehs during multicultural day because it’s “a sign of war.”
- October 2023: An Ottawa elementary school principal [told](#) a student to remove the Palestinian flag from their profile picture because it’s a “political statement.”
- April 2024: An Oakville high school counselor [recorded](#) telling a student

wearing a keffiyeh that he reminds her of terrorists.

Moreover, as student participants' insightful discussion of potential reasons behind teachers' silences highlighted, there are ongoing recriminations for teaching/advocacy around Palestine, including:

- August 2016: Smeared as a terrorist supporter, a Mississauga teacher was [suspended](#) following her appearance and speech at a rally for Palestine.
- May 2021: A Toronto educator who shared opt-in anti-oppression resource lists for over a decade was placed on home assignment and [investigated](#) after he shared resources related to Palestine amidst Israel's war on Gaza.
- November 2023: The same Toronto educator was again [suspended and investigated](#) after publicly criticizing CIJA's characterization of student protesters.
- June 2024: A Vancouver teacher reportedly undergoing a [disciplinary process](#) after a parent complained about the Palestinian flag and symbols displayed in the classroom.

As highlighted in our literature exploration, anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian schooling occurs within a wider Canadian sociopolitical context steeped in anti-Palestinian racism. This has intensified during Israel's most recent genocide of Palestinians, evidenced through:

- Delays in creating a Canadian asylum program for Palestinians from Gaza (especially in comparison with Syrian, Afghan, and Ukrainian asylum-seekers) amidst racist rhetoric of Palestinians as terrorists (sympathizers), only to later unveil an overly restrictive program "rooted in prejudice and ... anti-Palestinian sentiment" (Gould, [quoted](#) in Clair & Flis, 2024, para. 6);
- Alberta's Draft Social Studies Program of Studies k-12 [Subject Overview](#) completely erasing the Nakba while including "the establishment of the state of Israel and conflict in the Middle East" (for grade 11);
- Canada's [Anti-Racism Strategy](#) 2024-2028 eliding anti-Palestinian racism and using the IHRA working definition of antisemitism (eschewing [ongoing](#) critiques by Palestinians and anti-Zionist Jewish groups);
- The Ontario Legislature's [keffiyeh ban](#);
- Anti-Palestinian violence and threats (Mastracci, [2024](#));
- CBC News' censorship of Palestine and Palestinians (Schumann, [2024](#));
- Widespread surveillance, censorship, and repression of Palestinians and supporters (Basu, [2023](#), [2024](#); Lukacs, [2024a](#), [b](#));
- Ongoing smears of activism, protests and student solidarity (encampments) for Palestine (Basu et al., [2024](#); Sealy-Harrington, [2024](#); Wong, [2024](#)).

Countering Anti-Palestinian Racism in Canadian Schooling

No one should ever be made to ask, “are we not human beings?” or state that “you’re good as long as you’re silent.” Eschewing oversimplified ‘solutions,’ we offer the following considerations and actions¹⁷ towards countering anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian schooling:

Countering anti-Palestinian racism entails working against all forms of racism and oppression on these colonized lands. Educators must root their practice with a deep understanding of the violent, settler-colonial, and racist foundations and structures of Canadian schooling and society. This is not a racist colonial ‘history’ or ‘legacy,’ rather, ongoing settler-colonialism and systemic anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism (alongside all forms of racism and oppression). Moreover, our research highlighted how schools often perpetuate racism against Palestinian students and supporters of Palestinian liberation by appropriating, weaponizing, and *inverting* (the language of) anti-racism. This must be countered by creating spaces for honest critical discussions rooted in anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, and liberatory praxis (see, for example: Dei, 2000; Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021; Nxumalo, Nayak, & Tuck, 2022).

Palestinian students cannot continue to inhabit spaces where their existence is silenced, denied, and/or liberation is up for debate. Silences, silencing, perpetuating colonial mythologies, claiming neutrality, and/or presenting “both-sides” in situations of injustice not only reinforces oppressive structures, *it is profoundly miseducative.* Educators must take clear positions against genocide, racism, apartheid, imperialism, and (settler-)colonialism while encouraging critical analyses of processes/structures upholding systems of violence and unfreedom. Moreover, considering the ongoing dehumanization of Palestinians in media, it is especially vital to teach critical media literacy and analysis (a [great resource](#) is the “Critical Media Literacy Rooted in Ethnic Studies Curriculum Toolkit,” CLES & LESMCC, 2023).

Systemic anti-Palestinian racism must be named and (pro-)actively countered. Countering anti-Palestinian racism involves naming it and learning how to identify it. However, *action* is needed alongside un/learning. Providing several resources and examples, Shatara (2022) recommended the following actions for educators committed to teaching/learning for Palestinian liberation: explicitly *saying* Palestine and Palestinians; highlighting Palestinian diversity alongside connectivity; centering Palestinians and Palestinian culture; and reading/following Palestinian scholars, organizations, and activists. Highlighting several resources and examples, Elbardouh (2024) argued for countering anti-Palestinian racism through: building trust; modeling complex dialogues about injustice/violence; and centering Palestinians and Palestinian history, stories, joy, and survival. Alongside examples and suggested resources, Saleh (2025) discussed the need to not only include, but *center*, Palestinian (oral) histories, testimonies, and narratives in education. Saleh and Awwad (2024) provided an extensive list of online resources for teaching/learning about Palestine.

Countering anti-Palestinian racism entails collective organizing. Organize alongside others in Palestinian liberation/solidarity movements/collectives like Teachers for Palestine, Faculty for Palestine, the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM), and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) to demand changes in institutional and state policies, including the need for:

- Nakba education;

¹⁷ This section draws from Saleh and Awwad (2024).

- naming and countering anti-Palestinian racism;
- rejecting the IHRA working definition of antisemitism;
- BDS against Israel and all companies, institutions, and organizations that uphold Israel's violent settler-colonial regime.
- Because of collective organizing, there has been progress towards countering anti-Palestinian racism in Canadian schooling (albeit continuing to face Zionist backlash), including:
- "Nakba Remembrance Day" commemorated in the PDSB 2023-2024 school calendar;
- TDSB including anti-Palestinian racism in their anti-racism framework in June 2024;
- In March 2024, the B.C. Teachers' Federation passed a resolution to lobby the government to include the Nakba in the provincial curriculum.

Finally, we stress that Palestinian existence is a form of resistance against colonial elimination and erasure. Alongside deeply-rooted liberatory praxis and collective organizing, anti-Palestinian racism in schooling must be (pro-)actively countered by embroidering Palestinian culture, histories, narratives, resistance, art, literature, and joy into our classrooms and schools.

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