



How to Continue Talking

Research Report

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Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those anonymised participants who agreed to be interviewed for this project, setting aside their time to talk to us about the challenges of interfaith relations in the post-October 7th 2023 landscape in the UK. Without their insights and their generosity with their time, we would not have been able to complete this work.

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Author Preface

There is no denying that interfaith relations have been deeply impacted by the fallout from October 7th 2023 and Israeli military actions in Gaza and the wider Middle East since then. Whether connected to the region by familial, religious, social or other links, many UK faith communities have experienced the past few years as a series of painful traumas. At the same time, different faith communities have found themselves deeply polarised with irreconcilable perspectives about Israel-Palestine often crystallising and becoming more entrenched as communities reel from the unfolding violence.

Responding to this situation by attempting to better understand how violence in Israel-Palestine has impacted interfaith relations in Britain since October 7th 2023, the Woolf Institute launched the *How To Continue Talking* project in June 2024. As the lead researcher on this project, my goal has been to help to provide a way forward for polarised faith communities and discover examples of continued productive interfaith activity, analysing how these examples may provide lessons for renewed interfaith engagement and collaboration in a post-October 7th world.

Providing an academically rigorous study of the state of interfaith relations as manifest through local, regional, and national initiatives, this report offers insights into major issues that have impacted communities in recent years and offers suggestions for paths forward in building stronger and more resilient interfaith relations.

Whilst we saw much damage to interfaith relations in Britain, signs of hope were also to be found in many communities across the country. Whether it was faith leaders standing together to condemn all violence, faith communities going out of their way to support members of other faiths when they came under attack, or interfaith groups finding new ways to work together for the good of the whole community despite their differences, models for successful interfaith relations in the face of unprecedented strain could be found across Britain.

At a time of challenges, the *How To Continue Talking* project is an attempt to provide hope and light for UK faith communities striving to find ways to work together. None of us can change the situation on the ground in Israel-Palestine, but we can strive to ensure that divergent opinions about the region do not irrevocably divide us and pledge to keep finding ways to work together on a range of issues that impact faith communities in Britain. This work matters, and I hope that this report helps to point the way forward.

Dr James Sunderland





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Executive Summary



This report is based upon research carried out between June 2024 and January 2026 as part of the How To Continue Talking (HTCT) project. The project examined the ways in which the October 7th 2023 attacks and subsequent Israeli military actions in Gaza and the wider Middle East have impacted interfaith relations in the UK. In particular, it considered how British Interfaith Organisations (BIOs) have grappled with the situations that have arisen as a result of these developments.

Gauging the true extent of damaged interfaith relations in the UK, as well as examining examples of successful continued engagement and dialogue, the project has explored local, regional, and national differences in the state of interfaith relations and the practices of BIOs, when faced with a particularly complex and polarising conflict which has had a divisive impact upon faith communities.

In examining the major issues that have arisen within interfaith relations and between the members of BIOs, several key issues and areas of contention became apparent.

The Barriers of Language

Language and meaning are complex at the best of times. When using complicated and contested terms at times of distress, and when the conversation can be so emotive, things get even more difficult and the possibilities for disruption, the breakdown of dialogue, and misunderstandings multiply exponentially.

Terms like ‘Zionism,’ ‘terrorism,’ ‘genocide,’ and ‘ceasefire,’ are used frequently in dialogue around this issue – but they are being understood and used in very different ways by different communities. How other

communities were using language and terminology was a source of constant distress for many groups and communities and a barrier to dialogue. Both Jewish and Muslim interviewees spoke about the barriers that were created when terms became politicised.

The way we discuss Israel-Palestine has been mediated by top-down processes, including the adoption in some spaces of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. A number of respondents, including several Jewish interlocutors, pointed to the IHRA definition as both a stumbling block to dialogue and a significant factor in stifling dialogue around the issue of Israel-Palestine.

Time Together Builds Trust

A significant indicator of a group’s ability to sustain dialogue post-October 7th 2023 has been the amount of time prior to this date that participants had spent together beforehand. A lengthy period of working together on interfaith projects and building concrete, real friendships that extended outside of interfaith meeting and events militated against long-term damage to relationships.

Friendships allow, as one facilitator put it, ‘a strong enough relationship to get beyond’ strongly converging and often incompatible viewpoints on the issue. When offense was caused, it was thus assumed that the person was not acting wilfully in order to hurt/offend the person they were in dialogue with. With a sensitive topic which is so polarised, it is very easy to give offence, but relationships built over time, even casually, mitigated against permanent harm where misunderstanding or offence occurred.

Gendered Approaches to Dialogue

Whilst the issue of Israel-Palestine has been difficult for all interfaith groups, women's organisations have often fared better in handling difficult and emotive topics. There is more work to be done understanding why that might be, but anecdotal evidence from interviewees points to a difference in the mode of interfaith many women's groups employ when talking about such issues – often focusing on listening as a core part of their work, rather than immediate discussion.

Gender has played a big part in how faith leaders have been able to approach the issues communities have faced. Female leaders across Judaism and Islam especially have felt that their voices were not always heard in interfaith spaces, and that men have often spoken over them. There are also clearly issues as to the legitimacy of women as faith leaders which impact their ability to be interfaith voices heard and respected by all.

Faith and Interfaith Leaders Feel Underprepared

Those in leadership positions are often not trained or prepared to deal with the level of anger that arose in communities after October 7th 2023. Lacking expertise, many are afraid of inadvertently saying or doing things which cause more upset and losing the trust of their communities. Wading into a fraught conversation about geopolitics and its implications is something some leaders have sought to avoid.

Leaders also pointed to the emotional toll on themselves of convening and facilitating meetings where contentious issues are discussed or arise. Leaders have clearly had to try and cultivate resilience amidst extremely difficult circumstances, often with minimal institutional support. The emotional impact extends in some cases to anxiety over personal wellbeing.

Space Matters

Interfaith gatherings happen across a range of different venues, reflecting access, community support, and varied understandings of the purpose and place of interfaith within communities. Venues can have an outsized impact on the manner in which dialogue can occur as well as the power differentials experienced by community members.

Many facilitators and interfaith members discussed the need for a 'neutral' space to discuss anything pertaining to Israel-Palestine, though this has been hard for many groups to find. It remains to be studied if any space would be seen as 'neutral' by grassroots members.

One noticeable trend was the offer by many Church of England clergy to provide churches as places of dialogue between Muslims and Jews over the issue of Israel-Palestine. Whilst offered out of a genuine desire to help, and presenting the church as a neutral party, this showed a lack of understanding by Church leaders and members of the involvement of the Church of England in Israel-Palestine both historically and in the present moment. Churches are not neutral and carry huge baggage for other faith communities, something which church leadership sometimes did not consider.

Community spaces have been decimated by austerity and public funding cuts, leaving fewer possible spaces available for discussions. Some groups have hired venues especially for conversations around Israel-Palestine which can accommodate larger numbers of participants. However, this involves financial outlay which local groups often do not have or cannot justify. Some groups, with close links to councils and local politicians, were able to utilise these connections to secure town halls, offices, and other civic spaces but such access is contingent on these connections.

Recommendations

We make a series of recommendations for various constituencies. These recommendations were formed in the context of the changing state of interfaith relations post-October 7th 2023 and the continuing fallout from events in the Middle East.

However, given there are a number of complex and divisive geopolitical issues which are proving divisive to faith communities and damaging to interfaith relations (such as Hindu-Muslim relations in India, continued tensions and violence between Israel and her neighbours, and sectarian violence in the Middle East) which have led to communal disruption in the past, such as the 2022 unrest in Leicester, these recommendations are also pertinent to dealing with wider breakdowns in interfaith relations at times of acute faith community distress.

For more detailed versions of these recommendations, please turn to page 24.

Community recommendations

1. Adopt dialogue models that slow conversations, enable clarification, and accept ambiguity rather than enforcing fixed terminology.
2. Create space for contested language to surface diverse perspectives, even where disagreement remains.
3. Strengthen gender-aware dialogue by amplifying underrepresented voices and reflecting on exclusion in interfaith practice.
4. Prioritise access to neutral, shared spaces through partnerships with local authorities and civic institutions.

Policy recommendations

5. Avoid rigid definitions and standardised definitional frameworks; support processes that explore contested language and differences between communities.
6. Strengthen investment in dialogue capacity for facilitators to allow them to explore contested topics and terminology.
7. Invest in facilitator and leadership skills, including managing disagreement, crisis leadership, and support networks.
8. Treat long-term relationship-building as core social cohesion infrastructure, shifting funding and evaluation toward sustained engagement and relational outcomes, rather than crisis response,

Academic recommendations

9. Expand research on how interfaith relations and supporting infrastructure operate in the UK.
10. Develop sociolinguistic research on how language shapes inclusion, legitimacy, and conflict in interfaith contexts.
11. Conduct longitudinal studies on the medium- and long-term impact of the Israel–Palestine conflict on UK interfaith relations.
12. Increase collaboration between researchers and interfaith groups to support mutual learning and build positive relations.

Introduction



Following the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7th 2023 and the subsequent launch of military actions by the Israeli Defence Force in Gaza, British faith communities were forced to grapple with a number of issues. On the one hand, increasing polarisation, especially around the legitimacy and nature of Israel's actions in Gaza, became obvious and impacted interfaith dialogue and relations. Simultaneously, both antisemitism and Islamophobia in the UK saw sharp increases, deeply impacting the lives of Jews and Muslims across the UK.ⁱ

Against this backdrop, the Woolf Institute's *How To Continue Talking* project began in June 2024 to examine the impact of events in the Middle East upon interfaith relations in the UK, seeking to understand the damage done and how this might be mitigated against and/or repaired. The project also sought to explore examples where dialogue and beneficial interfaith relations had been maintained despite the strain that global events were having on community relations.

The objectives of the project were:

- 1) To examine the major factors that had impacted interfaith dialogue since October 7th 2023 and identify examples of successful dialogue around the issues that have arisen from this.
- 2) To assess how these factors impact the work of BIOs since October 7th 2023.
- 3) To provide some recommendations about how to approach the issues identified here as it relates to different constituencies (Government, interfaith organisations, communities).

Existing Literature

This project is the first study to analyse in depth the impact that the Israel-Palestine conflict has had on interfaith relations in the UK since October 7th 2023, based on interviews with people across England, Scotland, and Wales. However, other studies have informed its workings and fed into the process of carrying out this project.

Prior to October 7th 2023, the Council of Christians and Jews and Interfaith Glasgow collaborated on a study of the ways in which Jews and Christians in dialogue understood antisemitism (*Creating Brave Spaces: Learnings from a Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Antisemitism*). This work focussed in part on understandings of antisemitism and criticism of Israel, looking at how legitimate criticism of Israeli government actions were expressed and how this could be complicated by fears of being perceived as antisemitic. This work offered a useful baseline for understanding how such discussions around Israel-Palestine were occurring prior to October 7th 2023 between Christians and Jews.

Whilst a number of reports after October 7th 2023 focussed on the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on British society, a small number of these were of particular interest to those engaged in the study of interfaith. More in Common's 2025 report, *After Choosing Sides: Britain's changing views on the Israel-Palestine conflict*, addressed the deep divides around Israel-Palestine in British society and the polarising nature of the conflict. The report draws attention to the need for interfaith work and solidarity between faiths, and notes that a rise in tensions between religious groups in Britain became a top concern for many people

in the UK according to their polling from October 2025 (p.18). As well as providing useful data and insights, the report also speaks to the importance of interfaith work and the need to gain a better understanding of how the Israel-Palestine conflict impacts interfaith relations in Britain.

Additionally, collaborative work between Hope Not Hate and the Good Faith Partnership resulted in the 2026 report *Questions of Hope and Hate: Faith and Faultlines in a Changing Britain*. Based on interviews with senior leaders across Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and Hindu communities, this work focusses on the rising visibility and politicisation of religion in the UK and addressing as part of this the role of global conflicts in reshaping civic life. The authors make particular reference to Israel-Palestine as an exemplar of their argument.

Methodology

The project was based on the collection and analysis of qualitative data gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews which were carried out from July 2024 to July 2025. 35 people were interviewed on the record, whilst a smaller number of interviews were conducted off the record. For the latter interviews, we refer to general themes and ideas but do not quote from these conversations directly.

At the start of the project, a list of interfaith organisations was created, and many were successfully contacted, leading to numerous initial interviews. Further valuable contacts were then identified through snowball sampling. Participants related to interfaith work and interfaith relations as well as general community cohesion in a number of ways. Interviewees included facilitators of interfaith activity at both a national and local level, participants within interfaith organisations, faith leaders, council workers, MPs, and a former minister directly involved with faith communities.

Much effort was made to ensure a rough gender parity, and that there was a near equal divide between Jewish and Muslim participants

(it being assumed that these communities have been the most deeply impacted by the violence in Israel and Gaza) so as to get clear and equal pictures of the attitudes within these communities. This was achieved, although of course the voices of British Jews and British Muslims engaged in interfaith work may not be representative of the wider communities' backgrounds and opinions. Nevertheless, they do tend to have their fingers on the pulse of their wider respective communities.

One area in which participant sample diversity was less possible was age. Most of those interviewed were over the age of 40 (with the oldest being in her 90s). Whilst some younger members of interfaith groups were interviewed (with the youngest in his early 20s), these were a minority. Nevertheless, this skewing towards an older set of interviewees is indicative of the demographics of those seriously involved in organised interfaith activities and some faith communities, and therefore broadly representative of the interfaith sector's demographic leanings.

As well as interviews, we attended numerous interfaith events across the UK in different settings, to witness dialogue firsthand. Interfaith activities and dialogue can take numerous forms and data was gathered from a number of different dialogues and events which were witnessed firsthand. This was deeply helpful in getting a sense of general attitudes and divisions within those working on interfaith relations, and led to a number of contacts for the project. These experiences were an invaluable background to understanding interfaith relations since October 7th 2023 and the main challenges for the sector moving forward.

Interview data were recorded, transcribed, and analysed in data analysis software NVivo 14 to identify key themes and issues for different communities, forming the basis of these findings. Identifying information was removed to ensure participants remained anonymous. Ethical approval was granted through the Woolf Institute's formal procedures.

A Note on Terminology

One of the most difficult aspects of this project from its very inception was the various decisions which had to be made regarding terminology around what we have seen in Israel and Gaza since October 7th 2023. Immediately after October 7th, the use of terminology and language became heavily politicised and competing narratives and sets of terminology were quickly adopted by many in the UK, including within faith communities. The use of specific language and terms became markers that signalled a speaker's political attitudes towards events in Israel and Gaza. The outlooks expressed within these linguistic battles have proved to be deeply polarised and often irreconcilable.

The use of terminology in this document (such as 'the October 7th 2023 attacks and subsequent Israeli military action in Gaza' in the Executive Summary) will not align with all viewpoints or resonate equally with all readers and is a marker of the challenges that have beset the framing of this project from the start. The use of certain terms to describe various aspects of the violence (such as 'genocide', 'ethnic cleansing', 'terrorism', or 'self-defence', among others) ran the risk of alienating large parts of one or more faith groups, whilst a refusal to adopt and use terminology could also be alienating to some communities and influence how they would engage with us. This situation has no easy solution. Indeed, now more than ever, it sometimes seems unsolvable.

Where we need to refer to violence in Israel-Palestine in this report, we often refer to the 'conflict,' avoiding potentially much more loaded and inflammatory terminology. We are aware that this choice will not be agreeable to everyone. Meanwhile, we quote directly from interview participants who use a variety of terms to describe how they perceive the actions they have seen since October 7th 2023.

The use of terminology here is not necessarily a reflection of the researcher's views or that of Woolf Institute staff on what we have witnessed in Israel and Gaza since October 7th 2023. It is rather a reflection of the varying pressures upon the project – in the face of a lack of universally accepted terminology and existence of deeply polarised viewpoints regarding what we have seen since October 7th 2023. This is driven not by a desire to evade, but by a need for, and our mission to, engage with a variety of communities with strongly contrasting views regarding Israel-Palestine means this is perhaps the only feasible way forward.

Language and terminology are discussed as key findings, as this was an interview topic which consistently arose as a key challenge and battleground for many communities.

It is to our findings that we now turn. These themes are by no means comprehensive, but represent a number of major issues as our respondents communicated them.

The Barriers of Language



Language and Terminology around Israel-Palestine

The language and terminology used around Israel-Palestine has long been emotive and deeply polarised, and recent developments in the Israel-Palestine conflict have exacerbated this trend. Faith communities may have strong feelings about Israel and Palestine and have found themselves divided by the perceived acceptable limits of terminology and language.

More in Commons' November 2025 report, *After Choosing Sides: Britain's changing views on the Israel-Palestine conflict*, noted that 'issues of language do not affect most people in Britain who are not highly engaged in the conflict. However, for those with strong views there are real issues when a term used freely by one side is deeply value-laden or even offensive to the other.' [More in Common 2025: 66] This is particularly true for faith communities who are highly engaged with the conflict for a range of religious, political, and social reasons and for whom terminology is particularly important and fraught.

Understanding of the language at play is further complicated by the fact that many frequently utilised terms (for example, Zionism, Genocide, Terrorism, etc.) have become what we may call 'dialogue homonyms.' By this we mean that different communities understand the meaning of these words very divergently and use them in drastically different manners. This has led to issues of miscommunication as well as the crystallisation of irreconcilable perspectives about Israel-Palestine which has seriously

strained relations and led to greater polarisation as well as a great frustration as groups find terms quickly politicised and potentially toxic.

For instance, around 64% of UK Jews would describe themselves as Zionists [Institute for Jewish Policy Research, October 2025: 5], and whilst 'Zionism' means different things to different people who identify with the term, the weaponisation of terms such as 'Zionists' and 'Zionism' and the use of them as pejoratives is deeply offensive to many Jews, regardless of how they relate to the term. Jewish participants spoke of their belief in or attachment to Zionism in a number of sometimes conflicting ways. One grassroots member, in reflecting on his attachment to the term, said 'I don't wear Zionism as any badge of honour, [...] I don't even know what it means'. Nevertheless, it was clear in most of our interviews with many of the community that there was a strong attachment to the term as some part of many British Jew's identity. Disagreement over terminology here was therefore a raw point, touching directly on people's sense of identity. One Jewish facilitator in the north of England summed up how, among Muslim communities he works with, 'Zionism is a dirty word [and] trying to reclaim that is very difficult.' Nevertheless, it was clear that many Jewish participants continued to identify with the term, despite its contested meanings and sometimes negative connotations in wider discourse.

Several participants noted a more worrying phenomenon of participants in dialogue using 'Zionist' as a pejorative term for all Jews. One Jewish participant noted 'the conflation of Zionism' with Judaism is 'wholly unhelpful' to

dialogue, whilst another stated his concern of 'Zionism being a placeholder' for all Jews in discussions. Amongst some interfaith groups, the use of the term 'Zionist' thus came to be a weaponised word, used to attack not just those British Jews who might feel a connection with Zionism, but all British Jews. Such use of terminology is thus deeply damaging to building and maintaining interfaith relations.

This conflation between 'Zionism' and 'Judaism' was noted by participants beyond the Jewish community, with a non-Jewish director of a London based local interfaith group noting with alarm that:

Everybody is grouping Jews nicely into one group. That's not helpful. I don't think that's helpful at all. I don't think it's helpful to talk about Zionists. I've heard this year quite a bit of talk about Zionists, Zionism. I don't find that helpful, because actually, not all Jewish people are comfortable or happy with what's going on in the Middle East.

Such language use collapses the boundaries between British Jews (Zionist or not) and the actions of the Israeli Government, clearly crossing a line into antisemitism by implicitly suggesting the complicity of British Jews with the actions of the Israeli Government.

Even new terminology which has emerged alongside the post-October 7th conflict in the Middle East quickly became politicised. The example of calling for a 'ceasefire' after Israel began to launch airborne operations in Gaza in response to the October 7th attacks by Hamas is a particularly pertinent example.

The debate centred on whether ceasefires were a necessary and pressing humanitarian measure or whether any cessation of hostilities would merely allow time for Hamas to regroup and emerge stronger after any ceasefire ended. One female Muslim community organiser and interfaith facilitator spoke of her frustration:

...even the word ceasefire [...] fairly early on, became politicised. So as a result, I don't

use the word ceasefire. Of course, I want the war to stop but I wouldn't use the actual word for some people.

She explained that her avoidance of the term, however, caused issues with other communities as it led to them thinking that 'well, that means you don't care, right?' This was clearly a source of frustration for both the participant and some of the communities she was engaging with.

Her perspective was echoed by other participants, including a senior Muslim interfaith facilitator who said, 'the word 'ceasefire' became a very toxic word' and usage of the term by community members led to accusations of antisemitism. This was based on the idea that a ceasefire could allow Hamas to regroup and remain in charge, thus allowing them to further target Jews in Israel. Another participant, the director of a large interfaith organisation, spoke of how 'people found it very difficult, even as Jews, to accept that people using the word ceasefire, aren't antisemitic.' Thus, the emergence of 'ceasefire' as a rallying cry for some, immediately became a site of contestation and potential misunderstanding.

It is important to note that as well as being a barrier to interfaith dialogue, there were also intense intra-faith conversations occurring around language and terminology. One senior Rabbi noted that their community had engaged in heated dialogue about whether the term 'from the river to the sea' is intrinsically antisemitic, with the issue becoming deeply divisive between community members. Whilst there may be broad agreement within some communities about the extent of acceptable language in relation to discussing Israel-Palestine, faith communities are not monoliths, and the language and terminology acceptable to one person may not be so to other co-religionists.

The Interfaith Sector and Language

The terms individuals and groups employed to describe what they were seeing in Israel, Gaza, and other parts of the Middle East significantly impacted opportunities for dialogue in interfaith scenarios. This was obvious from the immediate aftermath of October 7th 2023, when many groups sought to respond quickly to developments by issuing statements addressing the Hamas attacks against Israel and the subsequent Israeli strikes in Gaza. These collective responses suffered from similar issues that individual dialogue faced – language and terminology that deeply polarised groups. Very quickly, fractures between different organisation leaders, as well as between organisation leaders and grassroots members occurred as statements were drafted and released.

Interfaith organisations have a tendency to seek out and employ inclusive, unifying, and non-religious terminology such as shared values, the common good, tolerance, tackling hate speech, and cohesion. However, the sector has struggled to contend with the terminology currently at play around Israel-Palestine and the ways in which this terminology, rather than being inclusive and unifying, is deeply divisive and has led to fractures and breaks within and across faith traditions. Navigating the different and deeply polarised discursive practices at play has been a central failure of many interfaith groups who have struggled to cope with language which is outside of their usual discursive practices.

The choice of language was a major stumbling block for many groups. An Anglican vicar involved with an interfaith initiative in the Midlands spoke of the anger of grassroots members when a statement was put out from the group, telling us that ‘it caused an absolute storm, and then, because it didn’t call for a ceasefire, lots of Muslims [were] furious.’ Meanwhile, when one local interfaith group sought to put out a statement that avoided all contentious terminology altogether, they found that two Muslim

committee members ‘both said, “No, this is unacceptably wishy-washy”. They resigned at that point before we issued the statement.’ Indeed, attempts to issue statements often led to fallings out of trustees and committee members. One chair of trustees found that his attempts to pull together a statement which dealt with the impact of the violence on UK communities led to trustees turning on him.

...some were really angry and accusatorial that I was ignoring the horrors of the Hamas attack. What they wanted was a diatribe about that and then to get on with the other stuff [...] I’m well trained in diplomacy, but I talked about Israel-Palestine, and they were angry that I’d mentioned the word Palestine and it should have been Gaza. [...] I’ve been accused since of being antisemitic and trolled [...] [It was] quite painful, yeah.

Of those we spoke to, only the committee members of one group that issued a statement felt that this process and statement’s reception were positive. And even then, the group’s co-chair noted that there were still some complaints from members, telling us ‘we got the odd few saying: It’s too pro-Israel or they’re too pro-Palestine.’

Divergent language and terminology has therefore been a major disruptor to interfaith dialogue since October 7th 2023. A Muslim interfaith campaigner and organiser summed up the issues polarisation around language was causing, noting the difficulties in the current climate of ‘finding language that makes it possible to genuinely show that all of it [the violence and fatalities on both sides] matters.’ They noted that much of the language and the narratives around the conflict that they encountered in interfaith spaces was ‘too binary.’ This binary language has a negative impact on good dialogue, and as one facilitator of interfaith dialogue noted, when we engage in such binary thinking ‘we lose the ability to be able to have a real conversation.’ This tendency has significantly weakened dialogue and driven communities apart.

The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism and Dialogue around Israel-Palestine

Whilst language is a socially constructed tool, with meaning and understanding contingent on a range of factors which happen on the ground as people engage in dialogue, it is also shaped by top-down processes which can seek to enforce definitions and police language and terminology.

In relation to discussions regarding Israel-Palestine, a number of respondents (of differing faiths, but predominantly Muslim and Jewish) raised the issue of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism when asked about barriers to dialogue [International Holocaust remembrance Alliance, 2016]. Whilst not all groups had adopted the working definition, it is clear many groups felt such tools often overshadowed their discussions and led to a more policed atmosphere.

Interfaith coordinators stated that the IHRA had 'really restricted' dialogue around this issue, with one experienced facilitator going as far to say 'I feel like the definition makes me feel uncomfortable. I can only speak about Israel to people I know well,' and summing up that 'I just don't feel it's that democratic in approach.' Such top-down processes, rather than providing helpful guidelines for interfaith dialogue, are limiting the sort of dialogue some participants and facilitators feel they can have and have become a point of further contention and confusion. Fears of being accused of antisemitism in relation to the IHRA definition when critiquing Israeli policy and actions were raised several times, such as by the facilitator who noted of the definition, 'I'm sure that is a huge block because people feel they can't criticise Israel. And, you know, the whole thing of just stopping conversation because you are worried about being antisemitic.' Whilst the IHRA does allow for criticism of Israel, it is clear its adoption left some members of interfaith communities feeling uncomfortable and overtly policed.

Fears that criticism of the actions of the Israeli Government or Israeli military may be perceived as antisemitic and fall foul of the IHRA definition are not new. A report by Interfaith Glasgow and the Council of Christians and Jews in 2023, prior to October 7th, found that some participants engaged in an experimental dialogue group of Christians and Jews felt that the adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism 'had in practice censored legitimate debate' and expressed 'anxieties around expressing criticisms of the actions of the Israeli government for fear of being seen as antisemitic.' [Interfaith Glasgow & The Council of Christians and Jews, 2023: 19 & 16] This project demonstrates that these fears are still very evident in interfaith dialogue today up and down the UK, and that these fears are shared by Muslim, Christian, and even some Jewish communities.



Time Together Builds Trust

As part of the project we spoke to a range of groups whose members had known each other for a variety of lengths of time. We found that the more time a group had spent together beforehand, the better they were able to handle difficult conversations about Israel-Palestine.

At a time when miscommunication and misinformation are rife it is very easy to cause offense or put one's foot in one's mouth. To mitigate against this, a lengthy period of working together on interfaith projects or encountering each other in, and especially beyond, this space meant that good will and trust were built up. This allows, as one facilitator put it, 'a strong enough relationship to get beyond' strongly converging and often incompatible viewpoints on the issue. When offence was caused, it was assumed that the person was not acting wilfully in order to hurt/offend the person they were in dialogue with. With such a sensitive and polarised topic, it is very easy to give offence, but relationships built over time, even casually, mitigated against permanent harm where misunderstanding or offence occurred.

One Muslim facilitator and coordinator of numerous dialogues post-October 7th spoke of how to have successful dialogue 'I think [we need] a bit of generosity in allowing the other to get things a bit wrong. If I use the term Zionism in a way that isn't quite perfect, if you use the word Hamas or terrorism in a way that isn't quite perfect, let's be a little bit generous and say, we're learning here.' Yet, as we have seen, language is a key issue for faith communities.

Nevertheless, long-term interpersonal relationships may mitigate some of the damage that occurs when communities have strongly divergent approaches to language and terminology and contrasting viewpoints on the conflict. One Jewish participant summed this up when explaining the issues she'd encountered with some friends:

I have a Muslim woman friend who completely disagrees with me on everything. I mean we've been talking since May '21; that's how we got into conversation when all that started, but she will still, if I'm going out to Israel, which is quite incredible even though, you know - well she really doesn't like Israelis or Israel - she'll ask me how I am when I came back and say: I hope you weren't too traumatised or whatever. So there's been real examples of disagreeing on nearly everything that's happening on the conflict but still some personal engagement, but I think that does take a very, very long time, because otherwise you reach out to people, or you feel this point of connection, and then something happens, and you don't have a strong enough relationship to get beyond it.

Another Muslim facilitator echoed her sentiments: 'if you know someone, you know that even if they say something you don't agree with, it's not coming from a bad place, it's [...] just because that's all they know.'

Friendships allow people to understand each other more clearly and better contextualise the actions, reactions, and statements of

others. One participant reflected very eloquently on this topic at length:

The thing that friendships does is it allows you to observe a person over a long period of time, and you see that person in their vulnerabilities. You see that person in their moments of weakness. You see that person when they're angry, when they're upset and you understand what does that to them.' [...]
'Whereas, when we just encounter each other [purely in an interfaith setting], I come as a Jew, you come as a Muslim or vice versa and we talk about a situation, we're almost configuring the conversation to be polarised. We come institutionally representing our positions, and all we can then do is deepen in our positions. We're not actually there to build a bridge. So, I think as much as we can take away from that dynamic of two groups talking to each other, the more we can be friends who are looking at something, sitting together, looking at something together, rather than negotiators sitting opposite each other.

Indeed, friendship which existed beyond interfaith gatherings was frequently given as a reason why dialogue on this issue was able to continue even where it was painful. A London based Jewish community organiser described how 'it is the relationships that were really... real relationships, not based on interfaith dialogue beforehand, [that] have stood the test.' She continued, 'there's one very good friend that I have, that I've worked with for many years, [she] plays a key role in the Christian world, and there was a specific point where we had a very, very difficult breakdown in our relationship, and we really made a point of working on it to get it back on track because we didn't want our friendship to break.' Her story suggests that links that are built and maintained only in the context of interfaith gatherings were not always strong enough to withstand significant stress. Instead, connections and friendships beyond these spaces are needed to create deeper ties and mitigate damage.

The strength of friendship was echoed in a great number of cases. Even when the situation was tense and communities were hurting and security conscious, friendships and long-term interpersonal relationships helped to mitigate damage and allow for the continuation of dialogue and important interfaith work. One uplifting example came from a senior Jewish faith leader, who reflected:

...in those places where there were good relationships, they continued. And many of our synagogues, particularly a year or two after October 7th, continue to host iftars and to have that kind of cross-section. I mean, like very soon after October 7th, for example, one of our synagogues has a Syrian women's drop-in centre that meets there regularly, and outside they have a big sign in Arabic at the synagogue directing, you know, the women who come to that space. And so you saw lots of those things continuing, you know, of both increased security, but a kind of added effort into ensuring that synagogues, I speak mainly about synagogues, continued to be the place for meeting for communities that may have within them, both Muslims, but also Arabic speakers and people with an Arabic background without increasing fear. And how important those relationships were, I think a lot of that continued and developed and became even more important.

The continuation of pre-existing interfaith work, which included the ongoing presence of Arabic signs which would likely have caused issues in some communities in the aftermath of October 7th 2023, is indicative of an existing relationship allowing interfaith work to continue with tangible benefits for the communities involved.

Some groups came together specifically to discuss Israel-Palestine, and in these cases, participants had often not spent time together beforehand. At a grassroots level these approaches often failed, and relationships quickly broke down, or the group disbanded.

Indeed, in one case a Muslim woman involved with setting up two interfaith initiatives told us that not discussing Israel-Palestine before participants had gotten to know each other was an explicit decision aimed at avoiding damage to interfaith and personal relationships: ‘we talked about friendship and building the relationships between each other. And also [I] said to them quite specifically, don't talk about Israel at the beginning, it doesn't work. So you need to build the friendships, and don't make it all about Israel and Palestine.’ In such cases considerable groundwork needed to be laid before the conversation could turn to Israel-Palestine.

In sum, at times of heightened community tension and when the margin for error in discussing contentious topics remains so slim, interfaith relations rely on pre-existing links and personal connections to avoid breaking down. Strong friendships and ties, existing outside of interfaith spaces as well as within, mitigate against permanent damage to personal relations.

Gendered Approaches to Dialogue



Whilst Israel-Palestine has been an issue for all interfaith groups, women's organisations have often, though by no means always, fared better in handling difficult and emotive topics. There is more work to be done understanding why that might be, but anecdotal evidence from interviewees points to a difference in the role of women within the communities.

Importantly, we must not essentialise women's approaches to interfaith. One male member of the clergy and interfaith facilitator in the Midlands reflected that whilst 'there is probably a thing to reflect on in terms of gender dynamics. There's this hackneyed thing that men aren't as good at this as women, or aren't as good at dealing with the differences.' Another member of the Clergy, a woman in the North-West of England, reflected on her role as a woman facilitating interfaith dialogue in the immediate post-October 7th atmosphere, saying 'I think it did make a difference [but] I don't like to generalise across genders.' However, our findings indicate that something in women's only spaces is allowing dialogue to continue with fewer deep and long-term issues between participants.

Where gender differences arose, we asked participants to reflect on why gender might make a difference to interfaith dialogue when it comes to Israel-Palestine. A number of responses were offered to this question, often focussed on the role women played within the family and wider community. One Jewish grassroots interfaith member in the North-West of England suggested that 'maybe it's partly to do with different positions in the community and what we think we have to represent.' This viewpoint was echoed by a Jewish woman involved in several interfaith

initiatives, including creating women's interfaith spaces. She reflected:

I think that the women who get involved in this sort of stuff, it's more collaborative, it's also a conduit into the families and the communities. You know, it's all very well to pontificate about whatever, but the women will tell you that these are the people in the community who need help. [...] The women are so much better placed to be able to see what's going on. They are the connection to families and the extended families. And so it's not just nice to include the women, and it's not just because they deserve [...] representation. It's that it's sort of almost naïve to do it without the women.

Respondents also reflected on the gendered differences in behaviour and attitudes in interfaith spaces. The Jewish woman above suggested that women bring 'a different tone of voice' to discussions. A Christian council worker in London involved in facilitating interfaith dialogue commented on what she perceived as more developed skills and emotional intelligence among female clergy:

...obviously my experience of female leadership means that, I don't think that it's surprising in terms of kind of emotional intelligence and ability to hold a very fractious space. I think the expressions of female leadership that I've seen have been able to do that and a lot better. And I guess from church, [...] my observation there is the female clergy are just miles ahead of male clergy on pastoral matters and just [...] their ability to hold space with sensitivity. Is there is a gender difference to their ability to hold space with

sensitivity. Is there is a gender difference to that, and I think a lot of that is not on the men, it's on the way we're socialised.

Several respondents also noted the friendships between women were deeper than friendships between men, and this impacted how they interacted when fractious issues arose. One Muslim woman involved with women's interfaith spaces argued that, for women, 'when it [dialogue] isn't working, it feels more personal and more meaningful than just someone that you hang out with every quarter at your average kind of interfaith meeting, that actually they people feel very upset because it's their friend.' Meanwhile a Jewish woman and grassroots member reflected that women tend to be 'better at friendship, you know? So[...] they're more likely to sort of make those trusting relationships.' A Jewish woman involved in facilitating women's interfaith sessions noted that 'women, on the whole, in the organisations that I've been involved in, which quite a lot of the ones where there are women, the women have taken the time and the effort to build those relationships.' The aspect of gender difference is interesting in light of our findings on the importance of long-term interpersonal relationships and friendships, suggesting women are often the ones responsible for building these relationships, possibly explaining why women's groups have often seen less disruption. However, more research would be needed to confirm this.

Gender has also played a big part within leadership, with female leadership across Judaism and Islam especially feeling that their voices were not always heard in interfaith spaces. As a senior female Rabbi put it:

We think about the issues that the church has in terms of women bishops and, you know, authority. What does that mean in terms of authority? Or in the Muslim community? Drumlanrig was amazing, and there were no women, like, no women! That doesn't mean that there are not really

amazing Muslim women leading communities. It's just that there's a different way of leadership within the Muslim community in terms of female leadership, and until we start supporting the breadth and diversity of faith in the UK and what it means to be in an authoritative voice and not just conforming to easy photos and statements, then we are going to make interfaith and social cohesion much harder.

There are clearly issues as to the perceived legitimacy of women as faith leaders which impact their ability to be interfaith voices heard by all. When women are not visible in interfaith and faith affairs it weakens their ability to shape the conversations that are being had, despite the importance of their input. The fact that even the Drumlanrig accords (a landmark Muslim - Jewish reconciliation accords signed by senior Rabbinic and Islamic leaders) was formulated and signed with only negligible input from female leaders highlights the way in which women's voices have been consistently ignored, undervalued, and excluded from interfaith work done by faith leaders.

In sum, whilst women have been marginalised in some interfaith spaces, women's groups have led the way in successful dialogue around Israel-Palestine, and it may be that the modes of interfaith and ways of discussing the topic that some of these groups have championed can be reproduced in mixed spaces. Likewise, female religious leadership has shown an ability to deal with complex and emotive issues in nuanced and emotionally sensitive ways in faith and interfaith settings. More should be done to include these voices in dialogue on these issues, and indeed all issues within the interfaith sector.

Faith and Interfaith Leaders Feel Underprepared

A major challenge for faith and interfaith leadership since October 7th has been how to respond to a major situation without causing upset and anger amongst their constituents and make matters worse. Whilst some of those in leadership positions are not unused to handling fraught issues within their communities, the level of emotion around Israel-Palestine created additional challenges and called for a higher level of communal and pastoral support than is often needed from communities. Additionally, both faith leaders and interfaith leadership and facilitators found an emotional toll to engaging in dialogue on the issue of Israel-Palestine. Meanwhile, some interfaith facilitators felt that they do not have the pastoral and conflict resolution experience to handle such fraught issues at all. As one facilitator who works as a family mediator told us, 'I'm not trained in anything and not trained to go and help. I try and help as best I can.' Faith and interfaith leadership has thus clearly been strained by recent events.

Those in leadership positions are often not trained or prepared to deal with the level of anger we've seen since October 7th 2023 relating to Israel-Palestine. Lacking expertise and deep knowledge of the issues, many are afraid of inadvertently saying or doing things which cause more upset and losing the trust of the community. The sort of preparedness to tackle these topics takes time, knowledge, and effort. As one veteran Muslim facilitator told us:

It's my day job to do some of this. I can take time to resource myself and read and learn and speak to people and it's not that I was always confident. I've become confident over ten or fifteen years of doing this.

This enabled him to facilitate and take part in dialogues about Israel-Palestine. He noted, however, that 'most people don't feel well-resourced or confident in being able to address these issues.' This was true of many of those in leadership positions that we spoke to. One council worker in London involved with interfaith initiatives told us that she had 'really, very, very little background and knowledge, and often feel completely out of my depth.' Even with large interfaith groups this has been an issue. The director of a national interfaith group noted the challenge of getting to grips with the issues at play, speaking of how 'I think there's still a lot of ignorance about the conflict itself amongst our staff, as much as anybody else. [...] We've tried to sort of train up and skill up in in terms of knowledge. [...] We've, kind of tried to educate our staff more on the conflict in the Middle East.'

Those in leadership positions have had to navigate complex and often deeply polarised community dynamics, where even the smallest misstep can shatter trust in their leadership. The chair of a national interfaith group expressed their struggle to try and not cause offense to any community at a difficult time:

I know I've made some mistakes along the way and I've had to apologise. I had one situation where I felt I had upset both sides because they both thought that I was leaning on the other side while I'm trying just to try and steer this middle road. It was fine but it was like 'oh, I'm so rubbish at this.' It's so hard isn't it?

Causing upset was a clear concern for many of those in leadership roles. A member of the clergy who had convened several dialogues after October 7th explained how she and the Dean had to be very careful how they communicated on the issue of Israel-Palestine to maintain community trust around interfaith initiatives:

in public, he [the Dean] is very careful about what he says and what he does. There's been a couple of times when he hasn't realised the make-up of the room and has used words like genocide and things and there was a Jewish person there who did get upset afterwards.

Such language can quickly derail meetings and end trust. One young interfaith practitioner who had experience convening and facilitating interfaith gatherings, explained how 'the margin for error is very, very slim,' which has 'taken away the ability to have amateur interfaith events because if you do not understand the dynamics of a faith group or even the feelings of that faith group at the specific time, you can go wrong so easily.'

Leaders also pointed to the emotional toll on themselves of convening and facilitating meetings where contentious issues are discussed or arise. A veteran community organiser spoke of how dealing with the issues that arose around Israel-Palestine impacted her emotionally and mentally:

...so people ask me a lot of privately, a lot of questions and wondering about things, and ask my advice, is it good to do this? Would I be able to do it this way? Should I try that? Why is my friend reacting like that? Like I get a lot of that. So that's why I've had to be my own, in my own way, I've had to be quite resilient, because I'm dealing with that stuff.

Leaders have clearly had to try and cultivate resilience amidst extremely difficult circumstances. 'Mental resilience has been challenging as well. I think that's been the case for a lot of us and even our trustees,'

another convener explained. This is especially true of those who are perhaps dealing with the fallout from events in Israel-Palestine for the first time. One woman who had convened and facilitated a dialogue around Israel-Palestine was shocked by just how much the experience had an impact on her, telling us 'I don't think I'd quite realised how much... how the tension was going to be. I should have but I didn't. You just don't do you?' This intensity and its impact was also spelled out by a Rabbi who spoke of how 'it's just very tiring to engage in conversation. It just takes so much time to just articulate your thoughts and positions. And then maybe sometimes it can be, yeah, it's just tiring.' Both faith and interfaith leaders repeatedly stressed this emotional fallout and its impact on them, adding an additional strain to their already often difficult jobs.

The emotional impact extends in some cases to anxiety over personal wellbeing. One Jewish facilitator who had been active in interfaith activities in and around Manchester for many years, described how he now felt more concerned for his safety in some areas of the city, whereas in the past he had felt he could visit any area without concern: 'now I am looking over my shoulder, so that is different. When people have murdered Jews because they are Jewish, you start to think, well what could happen. So, it is in the back of my mind, which it never was [in the past].'

This anxiety can also extend to concern for family members. A Muslim director of a large interfaith charity expressed how his work impacted how his entire family was viewed by some fellow community members: 'so when my daughter goes to school and her dad is known to be engaging with people who are supportive of the Israeli government's war on Gaza. So it's very difficult, so it affects me deeply, personally as well, because it's almost like you're seen as a sellout.'

These examples demonstrate how this work deeply impacts the lives of those engaging in the convening and facilitation of interfaith dialogue. This is especially challenging when,

not only are conveners and facilitators not equipped to deal with the fallout from these sorts of dialogue, but many (especially at the local level) are volunteers rather than paid staff. As one convenor argued:

Interfaith organisations, especially local ones, are voluntary led as well, so how can you expect an individual or a group of individuals who are working full-time to think through these unbelievably complicated issues and put together these unbelievably complicated programmes if this is just what you do five hours on a Sunday. It's really, really challenging.



Space Matters



The groups we spoke to met at a vast range of venues to engage in dialogue and to carry out events. The use of different spaces reflects differing levels of access, community support, and varied understandings of the purpose and place of interfaith within communities. Venues can have an outsized impact on the manner in which dialogue can occur as well as the power differentials experienced by community members.

Many facilitators and interfaith members discussed the need for a ‘neutral’ space to discuss anything pertaining to Israel-Palestine, although this has been hard for many groups to find. It remains to be studied if any space would be seen as truly ‘neutral’ by grassroots members. One facilitator suggested that it was not about finding ‘neutral’ space, but ‘proactively keeping a space that is inclusive of everyone’ which is more achievable for most interfaith initiatives. Meanwhile, a common term employed by facilitators and grassroots members alike was the creation and curation of ‘safe spaces’ and ‘safe places’ for dialogue to occur, though there was little consensus on what this looked like.

One noticeable trend was the offer by many Church of England clergy to provide churches as places of dialogue between Muslims and Jews over the issue of Israel-Palestine. Whilst offered out of a genuine desire to help, and presenting the church as a neutral party, this showed a lack of understanding by Church leaders and members of the implication of the Church of England in Israel-Palestine both historically and in the present moment. As one church leader reflected, ‘Christians are not neutral in interfaith dialogue, are they? And there’s certainly been a lot of issues between Christians and Jews and Christians and

Muslims in the past.’ Churches (and the Church of England) are not neutral and carry huge baggage for other faith communities, something which church leadership sometimes did not consider. Only one member of the clergy who offered church space to groups seeking dialogue around this issue stated that they had considered the ‘colonial history’ of the Church, and whether the space was neutral to the dialogue participants:

I was like, is it a neutral space, I don’t know. Somebody did mention that it felt like a very patriarchal space, which I agree with. I think it does. [...] when I initially said, it’s a neutral space, I then questioned myself. I actually questioned a lot about is that fair? Is that right? [...] and there’s no right or wrong answer, or no right or wrong way to deal with that, other than to say, this is really uncomfortable and messy.

Another former member of the clergy who is involved in dialogue work described how ‘the Church of England can naturally assume it takes the lead on a lot of interfaith issues. And it’s actually very bad, from my experience, of being willing to move into very much more neutral space. So, it’s very generous, but it sends out all sorts of subliminal signals.’ This was noted by other faith communities. For instance, a senior Rabbinic leader in the UK told us that ‘I think the Christian relationship with interfaith, Judaism, Israel, Palestine is unbelievably complex. And it’s exactly that kind of reason that the sense that they are somehow objective neutral is in and of itself, the wrong starting point.’ Thus, some Christians, though well meaning, appear to have misunderstood what role churches can possibly play in Jewish-Muslim dialogue over Israel-Palestine.

There was general consensus that religious spaces (mosques, synagogues, churches, etc.) were not often the correct spaces to discuss Israel-Palestine. As one participant of interfaith dialogues in the Northwest of England told me, 'I think, you know, it wouldn't have been appropriate for it [the dialogue] to be kind of at a synagogue or a mosque.' However, there was a general desire to be able to visit each other's places of worship as a way of building relations and better understanding of other faiths, especially at times of tension. As one community organiser and interfaith facilitator noted 'I think that there's still scope for the basics [...] to happen, to go into each other's spaces, to meet on different terms.' So, whilst there is a desire to continue to encounter other faiths in their religious spaces even at times of community tension, these spaces are not the correct place for dialogue around Israel-Palestine to occur.

Community spaces have been decimated by austerity and public funding cuts [Institute for Fiscal Studies, 21 June 2024: 2], leaving little community space available for discussions. Some groups have hired venue spaces especially for conversations around Israel-Palestine which can accommodate larger numbers of guests/participants. However, this involves financial outlay which local groups often do not have or cannot justify. Some groups, with close links to councils and local politicians, were able to utilise these connections to secure town halls, offices, and other civic spaces, but such access is contingent on these connections. For instance, one large group in the North-West of England was able to use the local Town Hall as one of the senior members of the group works there at a senior level. Meanwhile, other groups were forced to rely on goodwill and the offer of space by faith and civic community groups.

Unsurprisingly, where digital spaces were used there was significant disruption to discussions. 'Actually, maybe online spaces, on conversations on Israel-Palestine isn't the best one to have,' one seasoned facilitator noted in a rather understated way. Other groups found online sessions suffered from 'zoom bombing,' (the intrusion of unwanted and disruptive trolls) or that attendees' behaviours were more disruptive online. Only in one case, online meeting spaces were found to be preferable at times of crisis, as they allowed people to convene quickly. The director of a London interfaith group told us that 'we rotate where we hold our Board meetings. We rotate for faith sites, and then in October last year, we actually held some of the delicate meetings on Zoom because we needed to work really quickly. We held them online, and that worked well.' Therefore, whilst in an emergency, convening meetings online can be necessary, generally online spaces were not effective places for meaningful dialogue.

Ultimately, finding the correct space for dialogue at times of community distress is a challenge, with the utilisation of the 'wrong' space risking disruption and anger from grassroots members. In a challenging financial environment for many local groups, securing space often relies on local community trust and support which is not inexhaustible. More needs to be done to allow groups wishing to engage in interfaith dialogue to find suitable and productive spaces.

A Final Reflection



While interfaith relations since October 7th 2023 have suffered significant setbacks and substantial issues remain to be dealt with by communities, during the course of our interviews for this project no participant expressed purely negative feeling about the future of interfaith. All of our interviews concluded with a question asking explicitly about this future. Despite the complex and distressing issues often discussed in the course of interviews, all participants focussed on the possible positive futures for interfaith and how these futures could be achieved.

Participants often laid out their concerns and fears about the future of interfaith in a post-October 7th world, focussing on the way in which global events had set back interfaith work considerably. A Christian faith leader and interfaith organiser told us that, when it comes to interfaith relations ‘I feel more gloomy about it than I have felt for years. I think we have gone backwards years and years.’ Likewise, a Muslim interfaith organiser reflected that ‘I think it’s going to be difficult if I’m honest. It’s not easy. I think we’re constantly going to go backwards and forwards on this stuff.’ Meanwhile a senior Jewish faith leader stated her concern that setbacks mean that communities will retreat to their corners and cease interacting in some areas, stating that ‘the thing that really worries me is that as fear within all sorts of communities develop, is communities become siloed.’ These concerns were reflected by numerous interviewees who we spoke to.

However, even where people focussed first on their concerns for the future, all participants expressed hope for the future of interfaith relations and spoke of the ways better relations

could be built in a post-October 7th world. Many interfaith facilitators and grassroots members made reference to feelings of optimism about the future. One participant described her feeling of optimism, talking of how:

...if we can get through situations that we have over the past year, then there's a lot of hope for it. I think that there's always shifts in the trends in the way that we do this sort of work, or approaches to work, and I think that it will evolve in the interfaith space.

People’s optimism often focussed on how, despite the difficulties for UK faith communities in the wake of October 7th 2023, new ways of engaging may become possible. As one Jewish interviewee summed up: ‘I do think out of crisis sometimes something better can emerge.’ Meanwhile a veteran Muslim interfaith facilitator spoke of how this could become ‘a moment to think creatively about what more could be done and different ways we haven’t tried before.’

Clearly, despite the damages that have occurred to interfaith relations since October 7th 2023, many communities remain willing to work together to tackle important issues. As a senior interfaith organiser noted, ‘Interfaith has never been easy.’ Nevertheless, many people remain committed to continue the work of bringing faith communities together and building closer relations across religious differences. Whilst UK interfaith may change in the post-October 7th landscape, many people remain ready and committed to building better relationships and bringing about closer faith relations.

Recommendations



Our findings suggest a number of possible paths forward for interfaith dialogue in a post-October 7th UK. The power to institute various of these recommendations lies with different groups. Whilst some could be enacted by the interfaith sector and BIOs themselves, other recommendations would need political support and government willingness to become actualised. Meanwhile, further work remains to be done on an academic basis, examining the state of interfaith relations and further exploring some of the findings found here. We therefore provide here a few recommendations for different constituencies.

Community Recommendations

1. Communities face numerous challenges when it comes to interfaith dialogue in a post-October 7th world. Primarily there's a need for dialogue models that slow conversations down, make room for clarification, and legitimise asking "What do you mean when you say that?" without accusation. Rather than policing terminology or seeking universally acceptable phrasing (which often proves impossible) **interfaith spaces are likely to be more resilient when they explicitly acknowledge difference and uncertainty in language and terminology.**

2. Whilst it will be possible to continue building consensus around certain terms (such as shared values, the common good, tolerance, tackling hate speech, and cohesion), **space needs to be made for dialogues where language and terminology remain contested.** Focussing on contested terminology can allow for greater understanding of the diverse voices and opinions present in the interfaith sector and

allow people to understand other viewpoints (even where they strongly disagree with them and opinions remain irreconcilable on certain issues).

3. There is a need for **greater gender-aware community design within interfaith work, recognising whose voices shape interfaith practice and whose methods are treated as authoritative.** More needs to be done within communities to champion voices that are sometimes excluded from the conversation. Self-reflection on the part of organisers and facilitators may lead to insights into how certain voices have been excluded and how more can be done to centre these voices and bring their unique perspectives and approaches into play.

4. Communities must closely consider how they use space. **Access to genuinely shared, non-dominant spaces should be treated as a vital part of planning dialogue and events for communities.** This requires interfaith organisations to proactively seek out relationships with local authorities, and civic institutions to identify, protect, and make available appropriate venues where possible.

Policy Recommendations

1. Policy frameworks which prioritise fixed definitions or mandated terminology risk narrowing space for dialogue rather than enabling it. **Policy makers should work to support processes that allow contested language to be explored, rather than mandated in advance.** Rather than focus purely on shared terminology and values, policy makers should provide support for groups wishing to explore difference between communities and explore the uncomfortable

and difficult divergences of opinions within interfaith circles.

2. We caution against the uncritical adoption of single definitional frameworks without parallel investment in dialogue capacity. It should not be assumed that definitional frameworks or standardised language will provide consensus, but rather that they are likely to lead to disengagement by some communities from interfaith dialogue.

3. Investment in skills for facilitators should explicitly include skills on how to manage contested language and terminology and disagreement around these issues.

Leadership in interfaith contexts requires systematic support. Coordinated support structures, including access to training in crisis leadership, facilitated peer networks, and clear escalation pathways when tensions exceed local capacity are needed.

4. Preventative relationship-building should be treated as core to resilience and cohesion infrastructure. Investment in ‘quiet’ interfaith work is not peripheral to cohesion policy - it is what makes crisis responses possible. For policymakers and funders, **this means a shift from short-term, crisis-driven funding towards sustained support for ongoing interfaith programmes during periods of relative calm** which have the potential for large pay offs during times of crisis. This will also mean that **evaluation frameworks should be modified to recognise long-term relational outcomes**, not just immediate outputs or crisis responses.

Academic Recommendations

1. The study of interfaith relations in the UK and of the infrastructure that exists (such as BIOs) to support such encounters is still very much in its infancy. **Much work remains to be done to properly understand how interfaith relations can be built, maintained, and cultivated in the UK.**

2. The ways in which language and terminology are used in attempts by interfaith groups to legitimise themselves and encourage certain values which they believe are inclusive and unifying needs to be better understood from a sociolinguistic perspective. This would allow us to better understand how language operates in this space and the barriers interfaith groups face when confronted with language which does not fit within their models of linguistic inclusivity. Such work would strengthen our ability to confront issues of extreme divergence in the use and application of terminology as we have seen recently.

3. The *How To Continue Talking* project has covered the response of interfaith practitioners and grassroots members to conflict in Israel-Palestine and its impact on UK interfaith relations between October 2023 and late 2025. As the situation on the ground continues to change in the Middle East, **longitudinal research is desperately needed to explore the extent of disruption to UK interfaith over the medium and long-term.**

4. Many interfaith groups during the completion of the project welcomed academic efforts to better understand their work and the issues they face. **Further direct contact with interfaith groups should occur so that opportunities to learn from one another can be cultivated.**

Further Information

Other Resources

Our Reflective Guide for communities wishing to discuss matters related to Israel-Palestine and the impacts of violence in the region on UK faith communities is available on the Woolf Institute website. The guide lays out many of the important issues you may wish to consider when designing, hosting, and running interfaith dialogue which discusses Israel-Palestine. This advice is based on work completed as part of the Woolf Institute's *How To Continue Talking* project.

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ⁱ The Community Security Trust (CST) reported an increase of 147% in the number of antisemitic incidents in 2023 compared to 2022, with 66% of these incidents occurring on or after the 7th October 2023 ([Antisemitic Incidents Report 2023 – Blog – CST – Protecting Our Jewish Community](#)). Meanwhile TellMama reported the highest number of Islamophobic and anti-Muslim incidents in over a decade ([Tell MAMA recorded almost 5,000 anti-Muslim cases a year on from 7 October - TELL MAMA](#)).



About the Woolf Institute

The Woolf Institute is an independent interfaith charity founded in 1998, specialising in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. We work closely with the University of Cambridge to fund postgraduate students, teach students in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and in the Cambridge Theological Federation, and work in partnership with St Edmund's College. We conduct research projects across a wide variety of academic disciplines, and engage with public partners in schools, healthcare, grassroots interfaith groups, community organising, and public policy. Through research, education, and public engagement we seek to better understand these faiths, build trust between people of different faiths, and increase understanding and cooperation in society between people of faith and those with other beliefs and worldviews. We are committed to asking the difficult questions, listening to the experiences of others, and creating opportunities and spaces for people to encounter one another across difference.



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