



HISTORY

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Introduction

Kelly holds a PGCE in Primary Education and a Master of Education in Educational Leadership. She has worked in both State and Independent Education, most notably as Head of Year 6 at King Henry VIII Preparatory School, Coventry, and as Head of History at Bilton Grange Prep School, Rugby. Over the years, she has written and delivered a wide range of History curriculums and specialises in making accessible some of the more challenging areas of History for Prep-aged children. These include: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, War in Ireland including the Troubles and the Holocaust. Recently, Kelly has introduced the discipline of Archaeology into the broader curriculum, aiming to encourage pupils to practically investigate stories of the past.

Taking a Risk: Teaching the Israel-Palestine Conflict in Prep Schools

When asked at interview for the role of Head of History last September what makes an excellent History curriculum, my answer had been clear: it should cultivate curious minds, equip students with the ability to question, and most importantly, provide them with the tools to form their own opinions based on solid evidence and thorough analysis of information. Any historian worth their salt understands that history is often a narrative shaped by the victors. Therefore, it is essential for students to be exposed to multiple interpretations of the past. In fact, the DfE Programme of Study for History emphasizes the need for pupils to “discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed.”

History has the unique ability to transport students to any place and time. Unfortunately, many children often associate the subject with the distant past, which is understandable given how much time they spend studying topics like the Romans and Ancient Egyptians. While these periods are undoubtedly important, offering insight into how we

arrived at the present and providing a fascinating glimpse into lost worlds, their distance from the lived experiences of 21st-century students can lead many to see History as interesting but largely irrelevant. I've always been intrigued by the 'grey area' where the past intersects with the present. One of the most important aspects of my role as Head of History is to help students realize that they are witnessing and shaping history as it unfolds. There is no waiting period before current events become the historian's domain, making History anything but outdated or irrelevant.

As we entered 2024, the news was dominated by the latest escalation in the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, following the Hamas attacks on October 7th of last year. As events unfolded, our screens were flooded with harrowing images from both sides, creating a sensory overload that, as a new head of department, made me stop and reflect.

In informal conversations, it became evident that some pupils had already

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formed opinions on the conflict, largely influenced by the constant news coverage, social media, or discussions at home. On the other hand, for many typical 13-year-olds, preoccupied with looming entrance exams and the challenges of adolescence, yet another distant conflict, in a place they couldn't pinpoint on a map, simply didn't register in their daily thoughts. This isn't a criticism; I myself barely gave more than a passing thought to events like those in Darfur or Chechnya during my early teens. This got me thinking—could this be the chance to create the curriculum I envisioned during my interview? With my goal of developing a cutting-edge curriculum that pushed traditional boundaries and engaged KS3 pupils in a way that challenged and provoked them, I began to wonder if there was an opportunity to connect the past with the present.

Given the controversial nature of this topic, I embarked on a personal quest to uncover 'the facts' as reliably as possible. Perhaps naively, I didn't expect the proverbial 'rabbit hole' to be so deep! Like many others, I was filled with questions and, I admit, quite a few misconceptions. It was crucial that I got this right. My initial search on the internet proved frustrating—there is virtually no comprehensive teaching material or planning resources available. Everywhere I turned, I encountered a barrage of biased opinions and unhelpful commentary, none of which would be appropriate to present to a group of Year 8 students. After extensive searching for a source that offered as impartial a perspective as possible on this subject, I finally settled on Dov Waxman's *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: What Everyone Needs to Know*. As a starting point, I highly recommend this book!

To engage students and make the topic relevant to their lives, I decided to start

at the present and work backward. Beginning with the October 7th, 2023 attacks and the subsequent escalation of military conflict provided students with a familiar entry point into this complex issue. This approach was challenging, as much of the available material was intense and not necessarily age-appropriate. I also took great care to present every detail as balanced as possible, even ensuring that the number of photographs from each side was equal on every slide of my PowerPoint presentation. The central question of my syllabus then became, "How did it get to this point?" From there, the learning focused on exploring the key events and beliefs that have led to the current situation.

Another challenge was the sheer breadth of the subject. I had to determine what material was essential and what could be streamlined without compromising the curriculum's integrity. Eventually, I settled on a list of essential questions that would help students grasp the fundamental concepts of the conflict at a Year 8 level. These questions included:

- Who is involved in the conflict, and what are they fighting about?
- Who was there first? – A comparison of differing interpretations.
- When did the conflict begin? (more complex than it seems!)
- What role has Britain played in the conflict?
- Was Israel created because of the Holocaust?
- What role did the UN play, and how did it attempt to find a solution?
- What has happened since 1948, and how have borders changed?
- What is life like today for Arabs and Israelis?

- Who are Hamas, and how are they involved?

By dedicating roughly a lesson to each of these key questions, I was able to provide students with a comprehensive overview of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, equipping them with more factual knowledge than most adults.

As a student, I vividly remember my History teacher introducing us to a simple rhyme at the start of my senior school years:

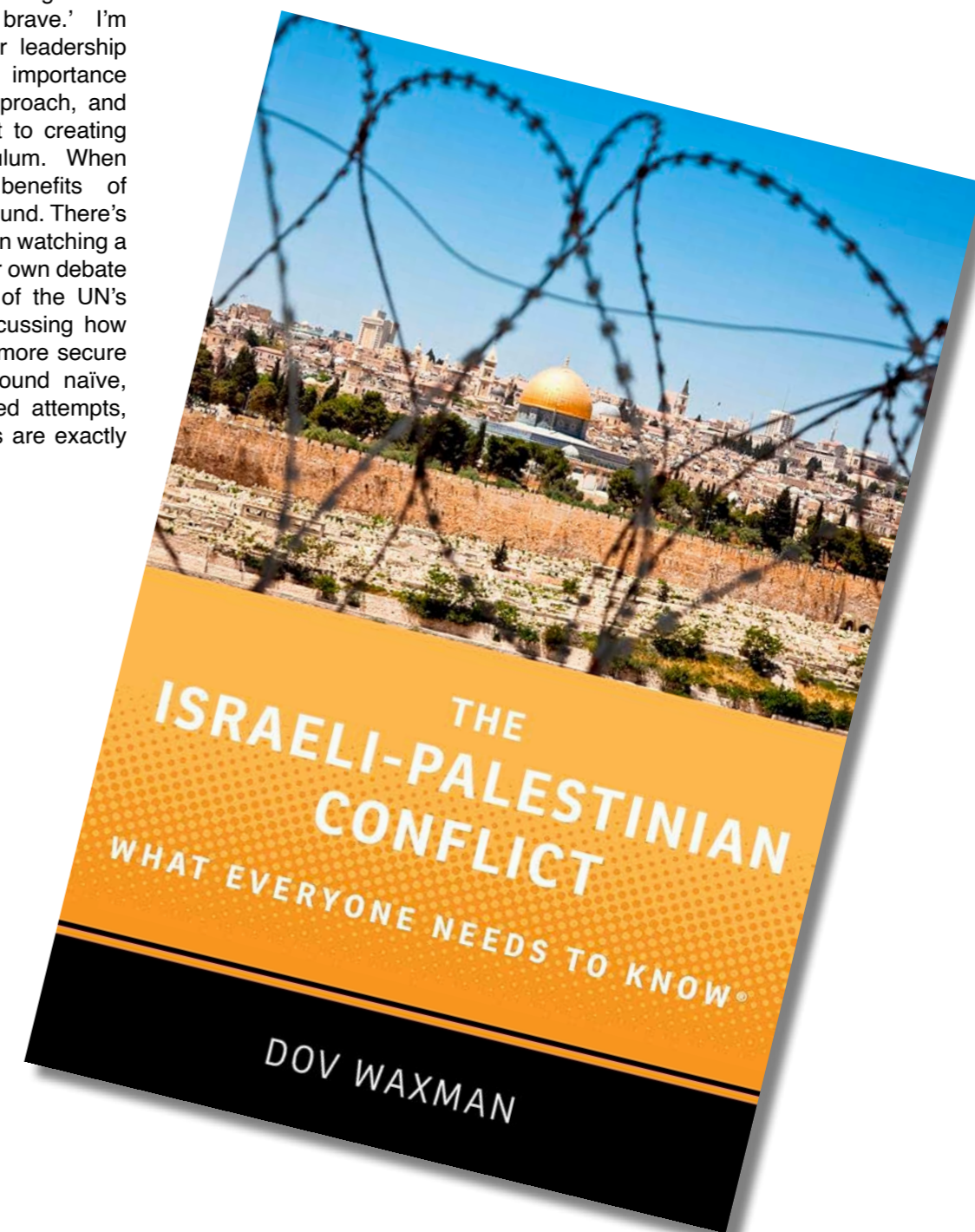
"I had six honest serving men,
They taught me all they knew,
Their names were 'What' and 'Where'
and 'When'
And 'How' and 'Why' and 'Who'."

Nearly two decades later, it still sticks with me. History is anchored in facts—what happened and what didn't. Yet, the complexity of this particular topic lies in the deeply held belief systems that shape both sides—the "Why." To truly grasp the entrenched nature of this conflict, students must also engage with the narratives central to both Jewish and Arab communities. It's crucial for them to understand the profound role of faith and belief in the struggle for this long-disputed land, and how religious interpretations differ between Arabs and Jews. This conflict is driven not only by territorial claims but also by religious narratives rooted in sacred texts. Only by unraveling these narratives can we begin to understand the motives behind actions that might otherwise seem incomprehensible to those far removed from the situation.

The topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is fraught with potential pitfalls, and for a prep school, getting it wrong could have serious consequences. So, should we avoid it altogether? Is it

simply too hot to handle? Emotions run high on both sides of the conflict, and even internationally. Mishandling this subject, whether through a lack of clarity, impartiality, or sensitivity, could cause more harm than ignoring it entirely. While planning this curriculum, I felt immense self-imposed pressure to 'get it right'—both in tone and in accuracy. However, I believe that if prep schools aim to continue shaping future leaders, they must be willing to tackle the issues that will shape the world of tomorrow—warts and all. Addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict means taking a risk and sometimes 'being brave.' I'm fortunate to have a senior leadership team that understood the importance of this risk, trusted my approach, and supported my commitment to creating a globally-minded curriculum. When handled correctly, the benefits of teaching this topic are profound. There's nothing more rewarding than watching a Year 8 class engage in their own debate about the pros and cons of the UN's 1947 Partition Plan or discussing how they might create a fairer, more secure society for all. It might sound naive, but after a century of failed attempts, perhaps fresh perspectives are exactly what's needed.

Who knows—
maybe one of these bright young minds
will succeed where previous generations
have not!





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