

British Museum caves in to Zionist lobby group, removes ‘Palestine’ from Ancient Middle East displays

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The British Museum has altered the labelling of some of its ancient Middle Eastern artifacts—substituting “Canaan” for “Palestine”—after UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) claimed the term inaccurately described civilizations that existed centuries before the term “Palestine” was coined.

The decision of Britain’s premier cultural institution to cave into Zionist browbeating has prompted a furious backlash from scholars in Middle Eastern history, archaeologists and experts in ancient Levantine cultures. They have criticised the British Museum’s decision as “part of a ‘systematic’ attack on Palestinian cultural identity” that contributes to the erasure of Palestinian history. Some 6,800 have signed a petition calling on the British Museum to reinstate the labels.

Israel’s genocidal onslaught against the Palestinians in Gaza has not only killed at least 72,000 people, mostly women and children and destroyed or damaged 80 percent of Gaza’s buildings, it has targeted Palestinian history and culture.

Israel has destroyed much of Gaza’s heritage, including its Old City and historic neighbourhoods, the Omari mosque and Church of Saint Porphyrius as well as other houses of worship, libraries, museums, archives, cemeteries, ancient homes, traditional markets and the archaeological site of Antheon Harbour, Gaza’s ancient port dating back to the 8th century BCE, according to a UNESCO report of August 2025.

In 2023, Israel seized land in the West Bank town of Sebastia—home to Canaanite, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic ruins that generate vital local tourism revenue. Since then, settlers have repeatedly stormed the area, and Israeli authorities are planning to establish an Israeli-run archaeological site that would strip Palestinians of both access and income. Israel’s security cabinet recently approved an Antiquities Bill that would establish a “Judea and Samaria Heritage Authority” with sweeping control over archaeological sites in the West Bank, a move expected to target 13 major Palestinian heritage locations.

This is all part of a declared policy of eliminating Gaza and ethnically cleansing it of its Palestinian citizens, a move that is now to be extended to the West Bank.

The British Museum, the BBC and other cultural institutions in the UK are lining up with the Starmer Labour government’s

support for Israel’s fascist government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump’s efforts to reshape the Middle East in the interest of US imperialism.

Its stance reflects of its broader historical role and ideological function as the custodian of Britain’s national and imperialist interests. Founded in 1753, as Britain expanded in its imperial reach, its early collections were assembled by colonial administrators, military officers, diplomats and private collectors. Some at least were not averse to outright looting, violence and coercion. The most notorious thefts include the Benin Bronzes and Parthenon Marbles. The Museum became the place for the display of the spoils of empire.

According to the UKLFI, the Zionist lobby group wrote to the British Museum calling for a review of its collections and to revise the descriptions of its artefacts so that regions are referred to by such names as Canaan, the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, or Judea, according to the relevant period. It claimed that some maps and descriptions used the term “Palestine” to refer to periods when no such entity existed and risked obscuring the history of Israel and the Jewish people.

The British Museum, in its response, said it was reviewing and updating its panels and labels on a case-by-case basis, and that it had updated its information panels in the Levant gallery, covering the period 2000–300 BC, to describe in some detail the history of Canaan and the Canaanites and the rise of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel using those names. A revised text devoted to the Phoenicians was installed in early 2025. Other changes included a panel in the Egypt galleries, amended to replace “Palestinian descent” with “Canaanite descent.”

The Museum claimed these changes were made last year after feedback and audience research and reflect a recognition that the term “Palestine” is no longer historically neutral.

The historian, author, and podcaster William Dalrymple called the British Museum’s decision to change its labelling “ridiculous”, arguing that the first reference to Palestine could be traced to 1186 BCE on the Egyptian monument of Medinet Habu. This was well before the biblical Saul established the Kingdom of Israel in 1047 BCE, which split into two—Israel and Judah—after Solomon’s death in 930 BCE. These small biblical kingdoms were but two of several short-lived polities in

the region that was dominated by the Assyrian and Egyptian empires at that time.

The Hebrew Bible—including the first five books traditionally attributed to the mythical figure of Moses, which describe events said to have taken place before and during the period commonly associated with the Exodus (around 1200 BCE)—contains numerous references to *Peleshet* and the *Philistines*. These terms are generally understood to refer to the broader region now known as Israel/Palestine, from which the ancient Israelites are believed to have emerged.

The British Museum is one of a raft of institutions that have succumbed to pressure from UKLFI. The organisation, which claims to be both a charity and a legal advocacy group, is notorious for its use of vexatious lawfare—the use of law and threats of legal action to silence Palestinian voices in universities, arts venues, schools, public institutions and NGOs.

UKLFI group has targeted numerous meetings, performances and cultural events supporting Palestine, writing letters warning organisations that they may be breaching to laws relating to terrorism, equality, charity or antisemitism. It deliberately conflates antisemitism with anti-Zionism, claiming that the term “ancient Palestine” serves to create a “hostile environment” for Jewish students.

Many of the institutions capitulated to their threats. Its targets have included:

* Interpal, which provided humanitarian aid to Palestinians in need, lost its banking facilities and ceased fundraising in 2021 following UKLFI’s campaign against it.

* The West Bank-based Defence for Children International-Palestine (DCIP), which Israel’s Defence Ministry later designated as a “terrorist organisation” in 2021, a move condemned by international human rights organisations. The DCIP challenged UKLFI’s defamation in court, forcing UKLFI to make an apology and issue a public retraction acknowledging that the NGO had no links to terrorism.

* A Palestinian film festival planned for 2022 in Edinburgh that was cancelled.

* A pro-Palestine concert, *The World Stands with Palestine* at Morley College, London was axed in November 2024, after a UKLFI letter claimed the event aligned with Hamas and risked inciting hatred.

* A display of Gaza children’s artwork was taken down from the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital after UKLFI complained it made Jewish patients feel “vulnerable, harassed and victimised”.

* Pearson, the publishing company, withdrew and revised UK school textbooks on Middle East history after UKLFI accused them of “anti-Israel propaganda.” It withdrew later versions after further criticisms of distortion.

* UKLFI has filed complaints against pro-Palestinian musicians Bob Vylan and Kneecap and condemned Glastonbury artists who displayed Palestinian flags. Massive

Attack, Brian Eno and Fontaines DC formed an alliance to resist “threats into silence or career cancellation”.

UKLFI challenged the UK’s government decision to suspend 30 out of 350 arms licences to Israel and filed a misconduct complaint against the International Criminal Court’s prosecutor Karim Khan, who issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu and his then Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. It played a key role, along with other Zionist lobby groups, in persuading the British government to proscribe Palestine Action as a terrorist group.

The Public Interest Law Centre and the European Legal Support Centre filed a 114?page complaint accusing UKLFI of issuing “vexatious and legally baseless” threats—strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) intended to intimidate and silence. The Solicitors Regulation Authority confirmed last August that it had opened a formal investigation into UKLFI.

The Charity Commission announced an active case examining the UKLFI Charitable Trust and its relationship to the lobbying company of the same name—a dual structure that enables an organisation to receive tax?deductible charitable donations while engaging in political activity normally prohibited for charities, raising the question of whether a registered charity can lawfully participate in partisan campaigns aimed at suppressing political speech.

In January, in a landmark case, the General Medical Council (GMC) threw out a complaint against the renowned Palestinian surgeon and rector of Glasgow University, Dr Ghassan Abu Sittah. UKLFI had brought the case to discipline him and ban him from practising medicine for his alleged support for Hamas, designated as a terrorist organisation by the British government, and opposition to the Gaza genocide.

The ruling was a major setback for UKLFI and its attempts to use professional bodies to intimidate their members and silence criticism of Israel.



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