

What Does the Keffiyeh Represent?

A BRIEF OVERVIEW FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

I Introduction

Students, teachers, and administrators across the United States often have questions about the keffiyeh, a black and white checkered headdress or scarf made of cotton:¹

- Can a student wear a keffiyeh at school?
- Can a staff member wear a keffiyeh while teaching?

Before answering those questions, it is critical to first understand what the keffiyeh is: **is it a cultural item, a political item, an expression of identity, a religious article, something else, or all of the above?** Only then can school leaders apply the relevant laws, policies, and procedures to the specific circumstances in their communities.

As described below, the keffiyeh has had different meanings at different times, but today, it is unquestionably a politically charged item. School leaders should analyze its use with that in mind.

II Historical Origins & Evolving Uses of the Keffiyeh

The keffiyeh was originally worn by Bedouin shepherds in the Middle East to protect themselves from hot desert conditions.² During the Ottoman Empire rule, rural farmers generally wore the simpler keffiyehs to shield themselves from the heat and sand, while the middle and upper classes wore the more ornate felt fez, or tarboosh.³

In 1916, the British took control of land previously controlled by the Ottoman Empire, including the territory called Palestine. Over time, nationalism grew amongst both the Jewish population and the Arab population in the land. Jewish people from around the world who had been living in exile and under foreign subjugation began returning to their ancestral home. In response, members of Arab factions opposed to a Jewish state used various tactics, including violence, against both British forces and Jewish civilians. Their leaders encouraged them to hide their faces with the keffiyeh — both as a symbol of national unity and “so that the British could not distinguish the fighters from the others.”⁴ The keffiyeh became a political statement in support of the “uprising against British rule that included demands for independence and an end to Jewish immigration.”⁵

In 1947, the United Nations proposed a partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab, but Arab leaders rejected the plan and launched a civil war. In 1948, the modern State of Israel was founded, followed immediately by an invasion of the land by five Arab states. During the 1948 War, the keffiyeh again rose in popularity, this time as a representation of Palestinian Arab solidarity and opposition to the modern Jewish state of Israel.⁶

The keffiyeh gained further prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, when Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (“PLO”), adopted it as part of his “distinctive style.”⁷ It was worn by some Palestinian

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/keffiyeh>.

² <https://books.google.com/books?id=RTEaEAAAQBAJ&pg=PA162#v=onepage&q&f=false>, beginning at page 164; see also <https://archive.ph/20240403211820/https://news.ufl.edu/2023/12/conversation-keffiyeh-palestinian-identity/#selection-251.0-319.47>.

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/keffiyeh>.

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/06/1216150515/keffiyeh-hamas-palestinians-israel-gaza>; <https://www.newarab.com/features/raise-keffiyeh-unofficial-flag-palestine>.

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/06/1216150515/keffiyeh-hamas-palestinians-israel-gaza>.

⁶ Id.

⁷ <https://archive.ph/20240403211820/https://news.ufl.edu/2023/12/conversation-keffiyeh-palestinian-identity/#selection-251.0-319.47>.

Arabs in support of Palestinian nationalism and opposition to Israel.⁸ The keffiyeh was increasingly used by Palestinian terrorist groups dedicated to the destruction of Israel, as they conducted guerrilla operations, terror attacks, and plane hijackings. Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a U.S. State Department-designated terrorist organization, is considered the first female airplane hijacker. The image of Khaled, holding a rifle and wearing her signature keffiyeh, is regularly displayed in posters, clothing, and graffiti worldwide by anti-Israel extremists.⁹

III The Keffiyeh as a Hipster Accessory

In the late 1980s, some activists in the United States wore the keffiyeh to signal support for a number of progressive causes, including “the Central American solidarity movement, the antinuclear campaign, and the antiapartheid struggle” in South Africa.¹⁰ Eventually, the keffiyeh started being worn by “urban bohemia” in general as a fashion accessory. According to a *Time* magazine article in 1987, “most kufiya wearers were ignorant of the scarf’s political — that is, Palestinian — connotations and considered it ‘just’ fashion or thought it cool because it was ‘ethnic.’”¹¹

IV Resurgence of Keffiyehs After October 7, 2023

The number of people wearing keffiyehs increased in popularity exponentially, and internationally, after the Hamas massacre against Israel on October 7, 2023. On that day, Hamas terrorists brutally massacred over 1,200 people in Israel, including 364 individuals at a music festival for peace. They tortured, raped, and murdered many of their victims, and took over 250 hostages from 42 different countries, including women, children, infants, and the elderly. Many of the terrorists laughed while committing their atrocities, proudly recording and posting them on social media. Before October 7 and throughout the day, Hamas leadership gave clear instructions to “slaughter” and “end the children of Israel” and to “broadcast” the images to the whole world.¹² Subsequently, Hamas leadership celebrated the massacre and vowed to repeat this type of attack until the Jewish state is destroyed.¹³ One Hamas spokesperson — called “the masked one” because he broadcast himself with a keffiyeh covering everything but his eyes — referred to October 7 as “the most professional and successful commando operation in modern times.”¹⁴

Since October 7, the keffiyeh is widely considered “one of the most prolific symbols” of, and a “token of solidarity” with Palestinian “resistance.”¹⁵ According to one keffiyeh retailer, it is “Palestine’s most well-known and powerful symbol of resistance against occupation.”¹⁶

Protestors regularly wear the keffiyeh en-masse while demonstrating against Israel. In too many instances, demonstrators — often with faces covered by keffiyehs — harass and threaten Jewish people on the basis of their identity, including their real or perceived support for Israel’s existence. In fact, some organizations even hand out free keffiyehs before protests. Some who don the keffiyeh are Palestinians themselves, but, more frequently, they are non-Palestinian individuals seeking to express “solidarity” with the Palestinian people — and against Jews or Israel — during the current iteration of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.¹⁷

At this moment in history, more than ever before, **the keffiyeh has become an intensely political symbol for most of its wearers, and not merely a cultural one.** The keffiyeh is widely used by leaders, members, and supporters of terrorist groups that attack the very existence of the State of Israel, and the Jewish people’s right to be free and safe in their ancestral homeland. In this context, whether or not it is the intent of a particular wearer, it would be reasonable for members of a school community to perceive the keffiyeh as not only a political symbol, but one that promotes a political agenda of extremism.

⁸ <https://archive.ph/20240403211820/https://news.ufl.edu/2023/12/conversation-keffiyeh-palestinian-identity/#selection-251.0-319.47>. Id.

⁹ See, e.g., https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leila_Khaled_-_Bethlehem_wall_graffiti_2012-05-27.JPG.

¹⁰ <https://books.google.com/books?id=RTEaEAAQBAJ&pg=PA162#v=onepage&q&f=false> at page 165.

¹¹ Id. at page 165-166.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/11/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-plans.html>; see also Hamas Charter, available at <https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/attachments/jps-articles/2538093.pdf>. See also, e.g., “A Memo in a Bunker, Intercepted Communications and Hamas’s Oct. 7 Plans” (October 2025) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/11/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-plans.html>; see also, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-road-to-october-7-hamas-long-game-clarified/>.

¹³ “There will be a second, third, and fourth (Oct 7 style attacks) because we have the will, the resolve, and the capabilities to fight. We are proud to sacrifice martyrs because we are known as a nation of martyrs”, Hamas Official Ghazi Hamad was heard speaking on camera.” <https://www.timesnownews.com/videos/times-now/india/hamas-vows-to-repeat-oct-7-massacre-on-camera-says-will-wipe-out-israel-as-gaza-invasion-starts-video-104916849>

¹⁴ <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/breaking-the-rules-abu-obeidas-message-on-the-first-anniversary-of-al-aqsa-flood/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.newarab.com/features/raise-keffiyeh-unofficial-flag-palestine>.

¹⁶ https://handmadepalestine.com/collections/keffiyeh-inspired-collection?srsltid=AfmBOoFzeW87P_FbSaFIP2eI_36ZL8AhC1WcwwzG_1kprliAS5wooMc.

¹⁷ <https://archive.ph/TJzeq>.

Recommendations

When school leaders face questions about the presence of a keffiyeh in their community, and when they review it according to their dress code policies, controversial issues policies and/or discrimination policies, they must consider the scarf's full context. Even if the keffiyeh can be a "completely meaningless hipster cliché fashion accessory" worn by "fashion party crashers"¹⁸, it is also a highly charged political symbol. It is common for Jewish students and staff members to feel fearful and/or targeted when they see the keffiyeh.

Below are important considerations for those assessing the presence of keffiyehs in their schools:

- **Public School Students' Freedom of Expression.** Students in public schools generally have the right to express themselves, including ideas that are offensive to others. However, when that expression crosses the line into discriminatory, harassing, or otherwise unlawful behavior, a public school has the authority to limit it. Moreover, even if a student's offensive speech does not cross a line, school leaders are still encouraged to speak up and clarify the school's values of civility, common decency, and treating others with dignity.
- **Public School Staff Members' Academic Freedom.** Similarly, public school teachers and school staff members have limited First Amendment rights that may be implicated by this issue, but those rights do not supersede their responsibility to keep students free from harassment, discrimination, or hostility in the classroom. Teachers must always ensure that they are using their positions of authority to educate, not indoctrinate or intimidate their students.
- **Private Schools.** Private schools generally have greater discretion to limit the dress or expression of their students and staff members. However, there are still many legal requirements to which private schools must adhere, and private school leaders should work closely with legal counsel to ensure they are treating students and staff members appropriately.

This guidance should not be interpreted to mean that keffiyehs should be banned in schools; far from it. There is no one-size-fits-all recommendation on this issue for school leaders. Rather, keffiyehs must be reviewed and treated like any other controversial or politically charged item. Thus, if a school dress code limits when or how or where a politically charged accessory may be worn by students or staff members, this must be applied equally to keffiyehs, regardless of the specific intent of the wearer. Similarly, if school policies prohibit teachers from expressing their own personal political views while in the school or require balanced discussions of controversial topics and items, these must likewise be applied equally to keffiyehs.

Our team is available to discuss any of this information in more detail and ensure that all students and staff members are safe, secure, and treated equally and respectfully.

Disclaimer: The following is not intended to offer, and should not be understood as offering, legal advice on any subject. Please contact your legal counsel for legal advice.

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/fashion/shows/11KAFFIYEH.html>; see also <https://books.google.com/books?id=RTEaEAAAQBAJ&pg=PA162#v=onepage&q&f=false> at page 168.

