

DISMANTLE ANTISEMITISM, NOT PALESTINIAN RIGHTS

Oppose the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism

The controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism does not make Jewish people safer, but it does threaten Palestinian rights advocates, and free speech. By design, the IHRA definition's focus on branding criticism of Israel as antisemitic makes it a tool to silence Palestinians and shield the Israeli government from accountability. It fails to identify the true nature of antisemitism or its root causes in white supremacy. We must fight to dismantle antisemitism, part of the machinery of division and fear interwoven with white nationalism and all forms of racial bigotry. But the IHRA definition only weakens this fight. **Lawmakers should reject attempts to codify the IHRA definition or use it as a guiding factor in law or policy.**

A TOOL FOR CENSORSHIP, NOT SAFETY

The IHRA definition dangerously conflates criticism of the Israeli state with antisemitism, suppressing efforts to hold the Israeli government accountable for human rights violations, rather than preventing attacks against Jewish people and Judaism.

Many of the most vocal proponents of the definition openly support its use as a censorship tool, and the definition is most often wielded to silence Palestinian human rights advocates - especially Palestinian and Muslim academics and students, who are frequently and falsely smeared as antisemitic solely for their speech in support of Palestinian rights.

The controversial IHRA definition does not serve the fight against antisemitism or other racisms. It does not differentiate between systemic and individual antisemitism, nor does it help identify the different forms of beliefs, tropes, speech, acts, micro-aggressions, discrimination, property damage, and outright personal violence that racism and antisemitism often take.

BROADLY OPPOSED FOR INFRINGING ON FREE SPEECH

The IHRA definition is a clear attack against constitutionally protected speech. Seven of the IHRA definition's eleven contemporary examples of antisemitism focus on Israel. Among them are "applying double standards" to Israel or claiming that Israel is "a racist endeavor." Existing anti-discrimination laws and policies protect

against antisemitism, and these efforts to police speech critical of Israel clearly run afoul of First Amendment free speech guarantees.

The lead author of the definition, Kenneth Stern, notes that the IHRA definition was drafted in order to collect data and gather statistics and has repeatedly argued against its domestic use in legislation or policy.

Attempts to codify the definition into law have been strongly opposed by a broad cross-section of civil liberties groups, Jewish and Palestinian human rights organizations, as well as major newspaper editorial boards. These include, but are not limited to: the [ACLU](#), the [National Lawyers Guild](#), the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), [Palestine Legal](#), [Jewish Voice for Peace](#), [Bend the Arc: Jewish Action](#), the [US Reform movement](#), [J Street](#), [The New York Times](#), [The Los Angeles Times](#), and [The Washington Post](#).

Indeed, the IHRA definition is so controversial and widely opposed that over 200 prominent scholars in Jewish, Holocaust, Palestine/Israel, and Middle East studies launched an alternative definition called the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#), specifically developed as a corrective to IHRA's problematic conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism and its attacks on free speech and Palestinian rights.

DEFINITIONS DO NOT DISMANTLE ANTISEMITISM

At the end of the day, defining antisemitism does not actually do the work of dismantling antisemitism. Legislating a static definition for any particular form of bigotry weakens our efforts to combat discrimination across different contexts

and over time. Lawmakers who truly seek to combat antisemitism must commit to dismantling it at its roots, alongside all forms of oppression and bigotry. As part of that, challenging antisemitism requires rejecting attempts to police how Palestinians can speak about their oppression. Criticism of Israel as a state that was founded and relies on the dispossession of Palestinians and the denial of their rights must not be filtered through a lens of antisemitism in order to determine its legitimate bounds - else we risk causing new injustices against Palestinians and their supporters.

To create safety and freedom for all people, including Jewish people, here are five [principles and practical steps](#):

1. Do not isolate antisemitism from other forms of oppression.
2. Challenge political ideologies and oppressive structures and policies that foment and rely on racism, hate, and fear.
3. Create environments that affirm and celebrate all expressions of cultural and religious life.
4. Make undoing all forms of racism and bigotry both policy and daily practice.
5. Practice safety through solidarity, not law enforcement.

The fight against white supremacy and antisemitism is inextricably linked with the struggle for Palestinian freedom. Lawmakers should reject attempts to divide our communities and instead work to build a future in which all people live in freedom and safety.

IHRA IN ACTION: SILENCING PALESTINIAN PERSPECTIVES

Concerns that the IHRA definition will be used to censor constitutionally protected speech are not abstract or theoretical, but based on actual experience. Proponents of the IHRA definition routinely wield it to smear and threaten protected expression in support of Palestinian rights.

For example, in November 2018, Jewish students at UC Berkeley organized a vigil to jointly mourn the deaths of Palestinian children killed in Gaza and Jewish people killed in the Pittsburgh massacre. Critics [relied on the IHRA definition](#) to complain to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, claiming that the vigil aimed to portray

“Israel as a barbarian and racist nation,” running afoul of the definition.

In April 2019, a group of anonymous students [filed a lawsuit](#) asking the court to force the cancellation of a panel at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The panel planned to discuss censorship of speech supporting Palestinian rights. The lawsuit argued that the IHRA definition justified a court order to cancel the event because the panelists’ criticism of Israel and its policies fell within the definition.

In June 2020, [Ahmad Daraldik](#) made history as the first Palestinian-American president of the Florida State student senate. Days later, his detractors surfaced a photo of Ahmad in Palestine standing next to a statue of Nelson Mandela, with a caption expressing outrage at the Israeli occupation. Many of Ahmad’s critics relied on the same rationale found in the IHRA definition to claim his statements were antisemitic, arguing he was thus unfit to be a student leader. He endured months of anti-Palestinian bullying including multiple removal campaigns and dozens of private hate messages.

Citing the IHRA definition (or definitions with similar content), anti-Palestinian advocates have complained about [film screenings](#), [academic lectures](#), [art installations](#), [divestment campaigns](#), [classroom discussions](#) and other course content, [student organizing conferences](#), [talks by Israeli soldiers](#), and more -- arguing that virtually all forms of campus speech critical of Israel must be suppressed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Distorted Definition: Redefining Antisemitism to Silence Advocacy for Palestinian Rights](#), Palestine Legal
- [Principles for Dismantling Antisemitism: A Progressive Jewish Response to the Jerusalem Declaration](#), Jewish Voice for Peace

[Palestine Legal](#) protects the civil and constitutional rights of people in the United States who speak out for Palestinian freedom.

[JVP Action](#) is a political and advocacy partner organization of Jewish Voice for Peace. It is a multiracial, inter-generational movement of Jews and allies working towards justice and equality in Israel/Palestine by transforming U.S. policy.