

A Critique of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism

Summary

Antisemitism is a real problem. It must be fought in all its forms. But adoption of the IHRA definition is the wrong approach. Labelling all criticism of Israel's behaviour as antisemitism does nothing to combat hatred of Jewish people, which today is very often linked to white supremacy. Moreover, silencing legitimate criticism of Israel impedes the struggle for human rights and a just peace in Israel/Palestine. The real fight against antisemitism must be joined to the struggles against racism, xenophobia and hatred of all ethnic and religious groups, as well as to the struggle for equality and human rights for all people — in Canada, in Israel/Palestine and around the world.

Fighting antisemitism means fighting racism

Antisemitism is a real and all-too-serious problem. The recent murders of 12 Jewish worshippers at a Pittsburgh synagogue, and one at a San Diego synagogue, as well as numerous other incidents in Europe and North America, make clear that antisemitism remains a dangerous prejudice. As such, it must be opposed in all its permutations, and people must be educated about this form of racism and how it is manifested today. The increase in antisemitic incidents cannot be separated from the rise of racism and xenophobia throughout the West. As a form of racism, antisemitism must be opposed on antiracist terms, in solidarity with other antiracist struggles and in concert with the principles of human rights and equality for all.

Unfortunately, the government of Israel and anti-Palestinian groups throughout the world are currently using society's legitimate concern about antisemitism to redefine antisemitism to include both criticism of Israel's behaviour and of the Zionist ideology behind it, which believes that Jews should have the right to dispossess another people and maintain a system of political domination over them. The goal of these groups appears to be the suppression of criticism of Israel and of support for Palestinian rights.

The IHRA definition will not help combat antisemitism

One of the primary vehicles that Israel and its supporters are using in this campaign to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism is the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism¹. This is the definition that the Canadian government incorporated into its new Anti-Racism Strategy, launched in June 2019². The IHRA definition was initially developed as a researchers' guide for the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia but was eventually dropped by that body³. Over a decade later it was hurriedly repurposed by the IHRA, as a "non-legally binding" definition of antisemitism⁴.

¹ <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/node/196>

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/anti-racism-engagement/anti-racism-strategy.html>

³ <https://forward.com/news/israel/163105/anti-semitism-fight-hinges-on-definition/>

⁴ <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/22096>

In Canada, Israel lobby groups including the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) are pushing for the further adoption of the definition by various levels of government, and by universities and police forces⁵. Their enthusiasm for this definition is not related to its clarity or insight into the nature of antisemitism. Instead, it appears to be motivated by the definition's conflation of anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel's policies with antisemitism.

We would suggest that is the very reason it is being promoted by Israel lobby groups, and that is why it is a threat to the struggle for justice and human rights in Israel/Palestine, as well as to academic freedom, freedom of expression and the right to protest. Moreover, the definition impedes the real fight against antisemitism, which is often coupled with white supremacy. Due to these specific threats posed by the definition, we oppose its further adoption in Canada.

Critique of the IHRA Definition

Our criticism of the IHRA definition is manifold. The 38-word definition is vague, virtually meaningless and almost all of its examples are context-sensitive. These factors make it a particularly poor tool for legal or administrative purposes and/or in adjudicating which statements, acts or incidents may or may not be antisemitic. Even its original author, Kenneth Stern, has strongly opposed its use for legal or administrative purposes. He has warned that such a use will be a threat to both academic freedom and freedom of expression⁶, as has the BCCLA⁷.

The equation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism is made clear through the definition's so-called examples of antisemitism. Of the 11 examples, 7 relate to criticism of Israel, while, sadly, all too common antisemitic acts — such as painting a swastika on a synagogue or shouting antisemitic insults at a Jewish person — are not clearly covered by these examples.

For instance, Example 8 of the IHRA definition states: “Applying double standards by requiring of [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.” This example is completely reliant on context and intent. First, many aspects of the state of Israel and the Israel-Palestine conflict are unique, such as the ongoing 52-year military occupation, and therefore it is possible to require unique behaviour of or make unique demands of the state of Israel. Second, individuals have a right to focus on issues that move them while giving less attention to issues that move them less. Many Jews, as well as many Palestinians and Arabs, do focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict, but for obvious and justified reasons: they feel personally connected to it.

It may well be that people who criticize Israel are antisemitic, but it could also be that they are expressing their views on the Israel-Palestine conflict for one of a myriad of valid reasons. Demanding particular behaviour of the state of Israel is not in-and-of-itself antisemitic. Labelling this as antisemitism not only impedes the legitimate struggle for Palestinian rights and freedoms, but also distracts from real antisemitism, which is often rooted in white supremacy. **IJV Canada opposes any adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism. Instead we recommend the government pursue a strategy that conceives of antisemitism as a form of racism and combats it as such.**

⁵ <https://cija.ca/policy-brief-ihra-defining-antisemitism/>

⁶ <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/JU/JU00/20171107/106610/HHRG-115-JU00-Wstate-SternK-20171107.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3b2sVOCMMKIkWyr9m5GAjXbSMnyTDueblENDqCwYFo5tSFwLMuzuDvxck>

⁷ https://bccla.org/our_work/the-bccla-opposes-the-international-campaign-to-adopt-the-international-holocaust-remembrance-association-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism/