

Addressing the most common question of the IHRA definition of antisemitism

1. What is the IHRA working-definition of antisemitism?

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism is an internationally accepted definition of antisemitism drafted by representatives and scholars from around the world. The definition includes multiple examples of contemporary antisemitism as it is manifested in public discourse, politics and media. As of September 2021, the IHRA Definition has been adopted or recognized by 33 countries and governmental bodies, including the United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Canada, as well as hundreds of universities and civil society institutions worldwide.

2. What is unique about the IHRA definition of antisemitism?

Antisemitism has often been called the world's oldest hatred, changing forms to fit shifting paradigms and cultural contexts. Antisemitism is not exclusive to one ideological source or political camp. In medieval Europe and Muslim societies, Jews were targeted as a religion, accused of being in communion with the devil and of deicide. As religion lost its sway in the modern era, antisemites from the political right saw Jews as a noxious racial element and harbingers of revolution. Meanwhile, left-wing antisemites condemned Jewish particularism and associated them with capitalism and exploitation. Modern antisemitism came to its culmination in the systematic destruction of Europe Jewry by the German Nazi regime during the Second World War.

In the past few decades, the world has seen a resurgence of a new form of antisemitism that largely focuses on Jewish peoplehood and statehood. This form of antisemitism calls for the violent dismantling of the world's only Jewish state, focuses obsessively on its misdoings, demonizes and delegitimizes Jewish peoplehood and promotes conspiracy theories surrounding Israelis and Jews. **The IHRA definition is the only definition that recognizes the three-fold historical nature of antisemitism: against Jews as a religion, as a race and as a people.**

It is this recognition that is the main source of opposition to the IHRA definition, largely by groups that are intellectually and emotionally invested in hatred of Jewish peoplehood and self-determination. The IHRA definition considers that denial of the Jewish people's right to self-determination, use of classical antisemitic imagery when talking about Israel, comparison of Israel to Nazi Germany and charges of Jewish dual loyalty to Israel *can* be antisemitic in certain circumstances. **Criticism of Israel similar to that leveled at any other country is not antisemitic.** These rather tame examples of Israel-related antisemitism shouldn't be particularly controversial.

3. Why is the IHRA definition of antisemitism needed on campus?

The deep historical, cultural and religious ties between the Jewish people and the land of Israel stretch back over three millennia and are expressed in Jewish faith, ritual and custom. The emotional connection to Israel forms a major part of Jewish identity, both for Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora.

A large majority of Canadian Jews (over eighty percent) consider the State of Israel to be a major part of their Jewish identity and have an emotional connection with it.¹ An overwhelming majority of American Jews agree that the statement “Israel has no right to exist” is an antisemitic statement.² The recognition that calls for Israel’s destruction and other tropes mentioned in the IHRA definition are indeed antisemitic is shared by the mainstream Jewish community in Canada and around the world.

Jews worldwide, and especially Jewish students, regularly find themselves targeted by exclusion, marginalization, harassment or even violence due to their real or perceived identification with the State of Israel and Zionism. Jewish students are being forced to relinquish a core part of their identity in order to participate as equals in public life.

According to a 2019 report by a campus antisemitism watchdog, pro-Israel and Jewish students are directly targeted for harm and abuse. In 2019, attempts to exclude Jewish and pro-Israel students from campus activities more than doubled, with expression calling for the total boycott or exclusion of pro-Israel students from campus life nearly tripling. In campuses worldwide, Jewish students have had their suitability for positions in student unions questioned because of their affiliations with Israel.³ In recent years, Jewish students on Canadian campuses have been subject to calls for physical attacks due to their “Zionism”,⁴ student unions have opposed campaigns for access to kosher food on campus due to the “pro-Israel” leanings of Jewish organizations⁵, and Jewish campus groups are threatened with

¹ A major survey was conducted in 2018 by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the University of Toronto and York University.

https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2994ef6_2

² <https://www.ajc.org/AntisemitismReport2020/Survey-of-American-Jews>

³ <https://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/mcgill-student-union-censures-jewish-student-over-israel-trip> and <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/03/ucla-student-government-questions-judicial-board-nominee-being-jewish>

⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/mcgill-student-leader-doubles-down-on-punch-a-zionist-today-message/>

⁵ U of Toronto Graduate Student Union opposes campus kosher food as ‘pro-Israel’

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/u-of-toronto-student-union-boycotts-kosher-food-on-campus-over-israel-divestment/>

losing funding if they do not cut ties with the Jewish homeland.⁶ **Without the IHRA definition, Jewish students have no protection against Israel-related antisemitism.**

4. Does the IHRA definition of antisemitism stifle free speech?

No, it does not. The definition is not a speech code, neither does it mandate any sanction or penalty. **The IHRA definition is a tool for education and identification of the most common forms of contemporary antisemitism.** The definition itself recognizes that criticism of Israel is not antisemitic, nor does any serious person suggest otherwise.

According to a recent guide to students put out by the UK Palestine Solidarity Committee:

*"In withstanding attempts to mischaracterise and suppress the BDS movement for Palestinian rights, it is important to remember that there is no other known case of any university directly citing the IHRA definition to close down an event that is legitimately critical of Israel and is therefore not anti-Semitic in the proper sense of manifesting hatred, discrimination or prejudice, towards Jewish people as Jews. If this were to occur this would be likely to be legally challengeable."*⁷

The claims that the IHRA definition somehow stifles free speech **rests on a highly dubious assumption that Jews "weaponize" or false cry antisemitism in order to protect the State of Israel.** A further problematic assumption is that the State of Israel is so odious that it cannot be defended using rational arguments, but by Jewish manipulation. The dismissal of Jewish concerns over antisemitism **is in sharp contrast to the well-known social justice principle that empowers minority groups to recognize the particular forms of oppression that targets them.** It is highly doubtful that many academics would countenance the suggestion that people of colour or aboriginal groups falsely charge racism in order to score political points.

Close to 700 academics worldwide have recently signed a [letter in support](#) of the IHRA definition.

If there is a free speech issue on campus, **it is the one faced by Jewish students who are regularly shut down, excluded and marginalized for expressing support or identification with the Jewish homeland.**

⁶ U of Toronto Graduate Student Union opposes campus kosher food as 'pro-Israel'
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/u-of-toronto-student-union-boycotts-kosher-food-on-campus-over-israel-divestment/>

⁷ <https://www.palestinecampaign.org/student-legal-support-guide/>

Jewish students need allies on campus. By adopting the IHRA definition, academics unions and institutions demonstrate that they take the fight against antisemitism seriously and that Jewish students are not alone.

To learn more see:

1. <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/world-remembers-holocaust>
2. <https://fathomjournal.org/fathom-ebook-in-defence-of-the-ihra-working-definition-of-antisemitism/>
3. <https://www.ilfngo.org/ihra>