



Why Supporting the Rights of Palestinians is NOT Antisemitic

Antisemitism is a form of racism, hostility, prejudice, vilification, discrimination or violence directed at Jews as individuals, groups, or collectives simply because they are Jews. Antisemites oftentimes target Jews for “undermining the white Christian race”, being money grubbers, and/or secretly conspiring to control the world with money and the media. However, criticizing Israel - which defines itself as the “nation state of the Jewish people” - for its discrimination, persecution, violence, and outright killing of Palestinians is NOT antisemitic.

Criticism of Jews for being Jews is anti-Semitic; criticism of the state of Israel is not. We should oppose oppression and apartheid wherever we see it, regardless of the religious identity of those who are committing oppression and apartheid.

Sadly, the Israeli government and its apologists are using society’s legitimate concern about antisemitism to redefine the term to include criticism of Israel. Ultimately, the goal is to suppress criticism of Israel and support for Palestinian rights. A primary vehicle to equate criticism of Israel with antisemitism is the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Group Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA-WDA). An international campaign is underway to have this definition adopted by governments, legislatures, universities and other public institutions. In 2019 the Canadian federal government incorporated the IHRA definition into its anti-racism strategy.

The IHRA-WDA is deeply flawed, misleading, and widely open to different interpretations. It opens the door to defining any criticism of Israel with antisemitism, and its adoption by lobby groups for this purpose is clearly opportunistic. Even the author of the definition, American attorney Kenneth Stern, strongly opposed its use as a legal or administrative definition of antisemitism.

Several of its eleven examples in the IHRA-WDA identify criticism of Israel or Zionism as antisemitic. For example, a person would fall afoul of the IHRA definition if they opposed Zionism as a form of nationalism or claim that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavour, even though the Israeli state is racist in its oppression and exploitation of Palestinians.

If the IHRA-WDA is formally adopted, those who voice legitimate opposition to Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians will be prevented from speaking or punished for doing so.

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (2021), drafted by over 300 international scholars working on antisemitism studies, provides a reputable corrective to the IHRA definition. The Declaration’s aim is twofold: (1) to strengthen the fight against antisemitism by clarifying what it is and how it is manifested; and (2) to protect a space for an open debate about the vexed question of the future of Israel/Palestine. This definition can be adopted as an alternative to the IHRA definition.



We all know the horrific history of the Nazis Holocaust. And we all know that European antisemitism was one of its main causes. But Zionism – the political and military movement for a nation state for the Jewish people – long predated the Holocaust and World War II. The goal of establishing a Jewish State, irrespective of its impact on the indigenous people living in there, arose in the late 1800s and grew over time.

The IHRA-WDA represents a threat to the struggle for justice and human rights in Israel-Palestine as well as academic freedom, freedom of expression and the right to protest.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism is not being presented in good faith. Its pro-Israel agenda is blatantly obvious. Its primary goal is to ban or criminalize criticism of both Israel and Zionism, as well as the support for Palestinian rights. It presents a threat to the struggle for justice and human rights in Israel-Palestine, not to mention academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to protest.

Antisemitism is a serious problem around the world and must be opposed in all its forms. Adopting the IHRA-WDA is not the way to deal with this serious problem!

FURTHER READING:

- How NOT to Fight Antisemitism, Independent Jewish Voices, Canada
- Report of the Academic Board Working Group on Racism and Prejudice, University College London
- Palestinian Rights and the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism (An Open letter from Palestinians and Arabs.)
- Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism

5 PRINCIPLES FOR DISMANTLING ANTISEMITISM

1. Do not isolate antisemitism from other forms of oppression.
2. Challenge political ideologies that foment 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.