


Why the definition of antisemitism has become such a polarizing issue

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Amid rising antisemitism in the West, a newly elected city council in Vancouver passed a motion this week to adopt a controversial definition of antisemitism that's drawn criticism worldwide, including from progressive Jewish communities.

Critics say that the institutionalizing of this definition clamps down on legitimate criticism of Israel, silences advocacy for Palestinian rights and undermines the fight against rising antisemitism from neo-Nazi groups, skinheads and white supremacists among others.

So what is this definition and what's so controversial about it?

In 2016, the Europe-based inter-parliamentary organization the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance decided to create a framework to understand antisemitism following an uptick in violence against Jews in the West — including a 2004 firebombing of a Montreal Jewish school carried out in retaliation for Israel assassinating a Hamas leader.

It then adopted a non-legally binding, working definition of antisemitism.

It said: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

Although that definition is vague, it's not controversial.

It's instead some of the 11 illustrative examples of antisemitism included as part and parcel of the definition that are raising serious concerns.

One example says: “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.”

While the example correctly links self-determination with “a state of Israel,” that definition is being quickly used to label criticism of *the* state of Israel as antisemitic.

“This conflation undermines both the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality and the global struggle against antisemitism,” a group of more than 40 Jewish groups around the world said in a joint statement in 2018.

Why is it that we can criticize Canada and other countries for their racism, but any such criticism of Israel can be too easily dismissed — and penalized when this definition is adopted by governments or other institutions — as antisemitic?

This policy makes it too easy to frame major organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Israel’s B’Tselem, which have all independently researched and damningly concluded that Israeli policies over Palestine constitute apartheid, as antisemitic. Already, Ahmed Hussen, the federal minister of diversity, inclusion and youth, said in the House of Commons last month that organizations applying for funding from Canadian Heritage would be vetted for antisemitism anchored by the controversial IHRA definition.

In the universities that serve as a battleground for new ideas, the IHRA definition has already served to chill academic freedoms.

“In academia, you’ve got these, like, very direct kinds of threats to funding, to teaching,” says retired sociologist Sheryl Nestel. “But (also) ... people are deciding not to think about, not to write about, not to teach about Palestine, because they’re afraid of what the consequences might be. So it’s like there’s a whole area of knowledge production being impeded.”

Nestel, who taught sociology and equity studies at the University of Toronto, recently co-authored a landmark report with academic researcher Rowan Gaudet, detailing the experiences of Canadian and European academics, artists and students who publicly support Palestinian rights.

The report titled “Unveiling the Chilly Climate” published by Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) details serious violations of academic freedom, harassment by pro-Israel advocacy groups and attacks from academic colleagues leaving numerous respondents they surveyed describing a significant toll from emotional stress.

At the University of Toronto, a hiring fiasco that outraged academic and legal circles around the world and was extensively covered by the Star, involved a dean who stopped the hiring of a prominent scholar after a Tax Court judge, who was also a significant donor to the university, relayed objections to the scholar’s academic work criticizing Israel’s human rights abuses of Palestinians.

A York University professor who debated the definition of antisemitism faced death threats and a sustained campaign to stop him from teaching human rights courses. These are but two examples in Nestel and Gaudet’s report, which offers a global and Canadian accounting of attacks, harassment or intimidation of Palestinian solidarity activists and academics who have either researched or supported Palestine.

The lead drafter of the IHRA definition, Kenneth Stern, an American academic and longtime expert on antisemitism, says it was not meant to decide whether or not something was antisemitic in black-and-white terms but more to “check the temperature over time,” for academic data collectors to examine correlation between, say, anti-Zionism and antisemitism but not to equate them.

He is vociferously against it being adopted by institutions and has said right-wing Jews are weaponizing it, using it as a shield to protect Israel from criticism.

On Wednesday, a coalition of groups wrote to Twitter’s new owner, Elon Musk, urging him to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism on Twitter.

But, as Michael Bueckert of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, tweeted on Wednesday, “Supporters of the #IHRA definition of antisemitism insist that it is not about silencing criticism of Israel. But in the Adopt IHRA Coalition’s list of 50 “examples” of “antisemitic tweets” that violate IHRA, a significant number of them are just ... criticisms of Israel.”

He goes on to list tweets accusing Israel of apartheid or of racist policies that the group highlighted as examples of antisemitism.

Rabbi David Mivasair wrote to Vancouver’s councillors before they voted this week, urging them to reject the definition.

In a letter that he shared with the Star, the rabbi wrote that while proponents claim the definition is harmless, “It is used to deny employment, to reject proposals, to stop funding, to shut down events, to revoke rental agreements, to remove participants from panels and forums and more.”

The rabbi is a member of IJV Canada, which is a prominent opponent of the new definition. He was joined by rights groups including the BC Civil Liberties Association, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the Canadian Association of University Teachers and Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East.

“Adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism is in direct contravention of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN Declaration),” wrote the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs.

It said that while it staunchly opposes antisemitism, its members “do not condone protecting Israel from criticism in relation to its settler colonial policies and mistreatment of Palestinians.”

A coalition of pro-Israel lobby groups is hosting a “No More Antisemitism” conference in Hamilton this weekend. “It is an extravagant production ostensibly about keeping Jews safe but actually is entirely leading to the predetermined conclusion that we need to further push

the IHRA,” Rabbi Mivasair said. IJV is planning a protest at the venue on Saturday night.

Antisemitism, one of the oldest hatreds in the world, is a scourge. Some Jew haters will critique Israel as a dog whistle for antisemitism. It’s precisely because of the nuances involved in every instance, that many scholars of Jewish studies and Holocaust studies balk at the idea of having a narrow definition at all, said Nestel, who was involved in the writing of the Jerusalem Declaration on anti-Semitism.

“We didn’t want to cobble together yet another definition of antisemitism. It’s not a useful exercise,” she said, but the IHRA definition forced their hand.

While the real and hard work to fight antisemitism must be done via education and raising awareness, sprawling definitions that blur distinctions between prejudice against Jews and legitimate critiques of Israeli policies only serve to undermine that work.



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