

AJC Position on a Definition of Antisemitism

The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism

American Jewish Committee (AJC) unequivocally endorses the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism, a vital educational tool that clearly illustrates how antisemitism is manifest in a variety of ways, from violence and discrimination against Jews to conspiracy theories and Holocaust denial. It also offers concrete examples of antisemitism related to Israel, while noting that criticism of Israel is not antisemitic. AJC played a critical role in drafting the text on which the IHRA Working Definition is based. More history of the definition can be found [here](#).

The IHRA Working Definition is the international standard used to explain antisemitism and thus aids in protecting Jewish communities around the world. It is used by dozens of countries, and recommended by multi-governmental organizations such as the United Nations, European Union, and Organization of American States. It has been adopted by scores of civil society organizations, universities, sports leagues, and businesses. An earlier version was issued by the European Monitoring Centre in 2005, and the U.S. Department of State has supported its use since 2006. The U.S. Congress, in encouraging Europe to do more to combat the resurgence of antisemitism, supported the extensive adoption and use of the IHRA Working Definition in the *Combating European Antisemitism Act of 2017*, which was signed into law two years later. Its adoption by left-leaning governments like Sweden and Spain and political parties such as the UK Labour Party demonstrate that the IHRA Working Definition and vigorous criticism of Israel are not mutually exclusive.

Alternative Definitions

Critics of the IHRA Working Definition, who claim it will stifle free speech or unfairly label critics of Israel as antisemitic, have recently drafted two “alternative” definitions: the Jerusalem Declaration and the Nexus Document. These versions, debated and promoted primarily within academics circles, focus almost exclusively on defending anti-Israel and anti-Zionist expressions. They also lack practical applicability that has made the IHRA Working Definition so useful.

The Jerusalem Declaration: This definition largely defines what antisemitism is not, rather than what it is. Attempting to shield any anti-Zionist expression from being labeled as antisemitic, it either minimizes or dismisses altogether those aspects of antisemitism. While asserting (correctly) that antisemitism is a form of racism, it pays scant attention to the unique phenomena that truly defines the world’s oldest hatred.

The Nexus Document: This definition has been described by its authors in Talmudic terms as the “Gemara” to the IHRA Working Definition’s “Mishna.” In other words, the IHRA text is the

clear and straightforward definition, while this version is intended to promote debate and discussion and digression among scholars and their students who ponder the meaning of antisemitism. However, with its discursive style, theoretical approach, and self-identified focus on Israel and Zionism, it lacks the clarity and usefulness of the IHRA Working Definition as a pragmatic tool for combating antisemitism.

Bottom Line

AJC understands how the use or presumed misuse of the IHRA Working Definition in the U.S., particularly when it comes to debate about Israel on college campuses, can be potentially controversial. There is a place for this deliberation when exploring the relationship between antisemitism and Israel, and the IHRA Working Definition itself anticipates this by noting that its examples “depend on the context.” However, this debate should in no way deter the U.S. from continuing to be a forceful advocate for the international adoption and use of the IHRA Working Definition as an educational tool that helps users identify antisemitism and address it in all its forms.

The IHRA Working Definition is a proven, useful, and effective instrument in the hands of police, government monitors, law enforcement and justice officials, and many others to identify antisemitism. It is part of governmental programs and police training in many EU Member States. Recommending the definition as an essential tool, the European Council published a practical handbook on how and why to use it. In this sense, the IHRA Working Definition’s value is that it is a genuine “working” definition. By offering a set of succinct and clearly written examples, the definition is readily understandable and usable to the policeman in Liverpool or the government investigator in Berlin.

Bottom line, the IHRA Working Definition has become the most widely accepted and adopted definition of antisemitism throughout the world. Defining antisemitism is the first, necessary step to combating it. It is vital for protecting Jewish communities, and stepping away from it would threaten the safety and security of Jews around the globe.