

Canada's IHRA Handbook Threatens Both Palestinians and Jews

October 31, 2024 IJV Canada

JOINT STATEMENT

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Independent Jewish Voices (IJV), United Jewish People's Order (UJPO), and the Jewish Faculty Network (JFN) steering committee, object to the publication today of a handbook offering guidelines for the application of the widely-discredited International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) redefinition of antisemitism. The handbook was mandated by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2021 and issued today by Canada's Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism, Deborah Lyons.

We believe the adoption of the IHRA working definition is itself antisemitic, because it conflates critique of Israel with racism toward Jews as a whole, and promotes anti-Palestinian racism. IHRA makes it impossible to fight real antisemitism while also engaging in truthful political speech about Israel's policies. We call for the government to immediately retract the handbook, and for all Canadians to refuse its implementation as it is unfit for addressing antisemitism and poses major risks for advocates of Palestinian human rights.

Originally drafted for academic purposes, the IHRA working definition calls antisemitism "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews," with eleven appended examples, seven of which name Israel. According to the lead author of the in definition, Kenneth Stern, these examples were not intended as incontrovertible illustrations of

antisemitism in and of themselves, but that is how they have been used in practice. For instance, the new handbook provides the following social media post as evidence of antisemitism according to one of IHRA's illustrative examples: "You can't be anti-racist and Zionist. Zionism is a racist & settler-colonial project to ethnically cleanse Palestine of Palestinians, including by genocide." Including this as an example of antisemitism represents a dangerous threat to freedom of expression, as many international experts have described Israel's current and historical policies in such terms. In this way, the handbook promotes the anti-Palestinian racist idea that virtually all Palestinians and their supporters are inherently antisemitic for accurately describing Israel's ongoing crimes and opposing the ideology of Zionism.

Further, by tying Canadian Jews to efforts that shield Israel—a state currently committing genocide in Gaza—from legitimate criticism, the government is inadvertently fuelling antisemitism. Conflating Jewish identity with the actions of a foreign state only serves to deepen dangerous stereotypes and scapegoating of Jewish communities, and erases the decades-long histories of dissent and debate within Jewish communities regarding Zionism and diasporic Jews' relationship to Israel. It is both harmful and irresponsible to suggest that speaking out against Israel's actions equates to antisemitism, when, in fact, this association risks further alienating and endangering Jews in Canada. In our current moment, the IHRA definition will be used to stifle necessary discourse and contribute to the anti-Palestinian racism that allows the international community to tolerate genocide.

The adoption of this handbook poses grave risks to all Canadians who advocate for international human rights. In her [October 2022 report to the General Assembly](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, E. Tendayi Achiume, urged all States to "suspend the adoption and promotion of the working definition and the examples attached to it", highlighting "the controversial status, divisive effects and negative human rights impacts" of the IHRA definition. Kenneth Stern [has warned against its implementation as government policy](#), stating that it is likely to be utilized to suppress political speech and academic inquiry, and referring to its effects upon enactment as "McCarthy-like."

The handbook produced by Special Envoy Lyons risks these negative human rights impacts, and threatens suppression of freedom of expression in academic, cultural, and civil discourse. At times, the handbook even intervenes in this discourse, by attempting to preempt questions about whether the State of Israel is a "democracy" and whether Jews are "indigenous" to Palestine – matters of legitimate political and academic debate whose parameters must not be determined by the special envoy. Any adoption of this handbook risks fueling anti-Palestinian racism and antisemitism, while creating conditions for political censorship in public discourse and the arts and culture sector, and could be utilized to harm any Canadian who speaks out on behalf of Palestinian human rights. IJV, UJPO, and JFN remain committed to addressing antisemitism and anti-Palestinian racism, standing with all communities facing oppression while unequivocally supporting the right to critique state policies in pursuit of justice and equality. Appropriating histories of Jewish pain by redefining antisemitism to silence Palestinian voices and public outcry over Israel's ongoing war crimes is offensive to our communities. Genuine efforts to combat antisemitism must not undermine the right to advocate for the protection and dignity of all oppressed peoples, including Palestinians. Upholding this balance is essential for a Canada dedicated to human rights and the protection of marginalized voices. We condemn the publishing of this harmful document, and call for all Canadians to reject its implementation.