

**Testimony in support to Senate Bill 297**  
**Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**Ohio Senate | December 4, 2024**

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Committee:

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Jewish (Federation) of Cleveland in support of SB 297- the bill to define antisemitism and expand the offense of ethnic intimidation.

The terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 ignited an intense wave of anti-Jewish sentiment and hate across this country, including in Ohio. Our state universities, local and county governments, trade associations and civic organizations have faced attempts to isolate and demonize Jewish community members because of their empathy and support for Israel after the worst killing of Jews since the Holocaust. We know that hatred against the Jewish community is not new, it is the oldest form of hatred and has driven the Jewish people out of their ancestral homeland in the land of Israel and led to the creation of a vibrant diaspora community in places like Ohio. What is new and ever-evolving is the way in which hatred against the Jewish community is expressed.

The most effective way to fight that hatred is to have a common definition. The need is clear. If you can't agree on what is hate speech, you cannot address it.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) is the most commonly accepted and mainstream definition of antisemitism. Since its introduction in 2016, nearly 1,300 entities have adopted that definition. Counted in that number are 45 countries, including the United States, as well as 37 state governments and 96 city and county governments within the United States. The definition is as follows: "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."

The contemporary examples included in the IHRA definition have clear application in the latest surge of hate facing the Jewish community. In November 2024, we saw neo-Nazi's marching through the streets of Columbus calling for violence against Jews. For the last year in a multitude of forums, we have heard the false claims of a genocide perpetrated by the Jewish state – something refuted by every major government and even the census of the Palestinian population in Gaza which rose in the year following the terrorist attacks in Israel. These claims are followed by the insistence that Israel be held to a standard that we ask of no other country in the world and of course, the refusal to grant the Jewish state the same right to self determination as would be granted to any other country. Using the IHRA definition, it is antisemitic to challenge the legitimacy of a state while also attempting to re-write history of how and why it was created in the first place. We know that at a time when as many as 90% of Jews identify as

Zionists, replacing the word Jew with Zionist is the same hateful intent and message. The Jewish people deserve the right to define what is hateful to their own community.

Critics of the IHRA definition claims that it limits speech or criticism of the Israeli government but the definition does not make speech illegal, but rather labels what constitutes antisemitic language and creates a helpful tool for agencies, organizations, universities and any other relevant stakeholders to denounce hatred and provide a sense of security for Jewish Ohioans. This bill is written with the stated intent to not diminish or infringe on any right protected by the First Amendment. Any suggestion that the language or application be broader is intentionally minimizing and obfuscating that the Jewish community is the most targeted religious or ethnic community in the country and there is an obligation to address all forms of this hatred.

The IHRA definition has been the working definition for the state of Ohio through executive order since 2022 and it is an important step and statement to codify this into law rather than allow it to be subject to the winds of political change. The Jewish community of Ohio is facing unprecedented threats and passage of this bill will be a foundational piece to ensuring their rights and safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony and consideration of this bill.

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