

CHAIRMAN MANNING, VICE CHAIR REYNOLDS, RANKING MEMBER HICKS-HUDSON,
AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

My name is Ann Ghazy, and I am here to express my opposition to SB 297. As a former American expat living in Egypt with my Egyptian husband, where the freedom to assemble and protest was non-existent, I deeply understand how precious and fragile the right to free speech truly is. This experience made me especially aware of the importance of protecting these rights in Ohio. That is why I am providing a testimonial for the first time.

While the bill claims to address essential concerns about ethnic intimidation and antisemitism, its provisions risk unintended consequences that could harm our precious right to free speech, academic freedom, and the ability to have free and open public dialogue in Ohio.

Criticism of Zionism, defined as: **“The nationalist and settler colonial project predicated on European conquering ideology and infused with a political mission of establishing an exclusively Jewish State at the expense of the Indigenous Palestinian Arab population,”** is legitimate political discourse. It is criticism of Zionism that parallels criticism of other political ideologies and state actions. SB 297 risks conflating such critiques with antisemitism, thereby suppressing necessary conversations on justice and self-determination.

By tying the IHRA definition to legal and administrative decisions, this bill risks confusing legitimate criticism of Israel’s policies or the political ideology of Zionism with antisemitism. Such conflation undermines valid discussions about human rights and self-determination and threatens to stifle debates necessary for a healthy democracy.

The same norms of debate that apply to other nations and conflicts over national self-determination must also apply to Israel. Criticism of Zionism or Israeli government actions—just like critiques of any other nation-state or political ideology—is not inherently antisemitic, as even the IHRA definition acknowledges in its clarification. This bill, however, could lead to misinterpretations, especially in academic and activist spaces.

Furthermore, expanding ethnic intimidation to include riot and aggravated riot under certain conditions may disproportionately target and criminalize protest movements. This could suppress marginalized communities who often rely on peaceful collective action to advocate for justice, risking penalties far beyond the scope of their actions. Ohio must not adopt policies reminiscent of repressive regimes where dissenting voices are silenced, and individuals are unjustly punished for opposing injustice.

Ohio must ensure that any legislation addressing discrimination or hate crimes strikes a balance that protects against genuine antisemitism without infringing on First Amendment rights or silencing important political conversations. To that end, I urge you to reject SB 297 and instead focus on measures that address hate and discrimination without compromising civil liberties and open debate.