

Sean Abbott-Klafter, written testimony in opposition to SB 297

I am a resident of Cleveland Heights and I am writing to oppose Senate Bill 297 (SB 297). While purporting to fight antisemitism, this bill will in actuality stifle free speech and suppress legitimate criticism of the State of Israel. SB 297 writes the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism- including the "contemporary examples"- into state law and ties that definition to heightened criminal penalties for the crime of "ethnic intimidation." If passed this bill will be used to punish, and potentially imprison, Jewish activists like myself who believe that the State of Israel is not only carrying out a genocide in Gaza, but has, since its inception, relied upon the racist dispossession, dehumanization, and occupation of Palestinians. My view is not one that is informed by antisemitism- the hatred of the Jewish people- but rather my family history and a lifelong commitment to studying the history of Israel and Palestine.

My grandfather Ira was a proud Jew who served in the Army during WWII. Although he was alive to witness the founding of the State of Israel, he opposed the formation of Israel in Palestine because he viewed it- to use the language of his day- as an imperial project of the western powers. After coming home from WWII, Ira experienced the disgraceful suppression of free speech during McCarthyism. He was fired from his job working for the Navy because he had signed a petition nominating a left wing political candidate for office at some point in the 1930s. For a number of years Ira bounced from job to job, getting fired several times due to his political views. At one point, he was fired from a job selling mattresses at a department store after the FBI came to his work and told his managers that he was a "security threat." During McCarthyism, countless Americans like Ira had their careers and lives destroyed by a government intent on policing the political speech and beliefs of its citizens.

SB 297 threatens to send us right back down this repressive and anti-democratic path. People must be free to criticize and protest the actions of any nation. The "contemporary examples" in the IHRA definition of antisemitism equate criticism of Israel with antisemitism. Not only will this conflation make it harder to fight the very real antisemitism of white nationalists, but it will set the stage for another era of censorship.

Growing up I spent lots of time in Jewish cultural and educational spaces. I was constantly reading about, discussing, and debating the history of Israel with my peers and my teachers. I remember when my mother, who is South African, gave me a pamphlet by the great South African freedom fighter, Desmond Tutu. In the pamphlet Tutu described the parallels that he saw between the system of apartheid in South Africa, and Israel's occupation of Palestinians. My views- which would be labeled as antisemitic by the IHRA- were formed through years of careful study. Ironically, even Ira would have been labeled an antisemite by the IHRA for his opposition to Israel. What's not ironic though, is that we are teetering on the brink of another McCarthyism.

I urge you to oppose this anti-democratic bill.