

**To: Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee
December 11th, 2024**

Re: Opposition to Adoption of IHRA Definition of Antisemitism in SB 297

Dear Chairman Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

I am a 62-year-old Jewish resident of NE Ohio. I grew up here, surrounded by Jewish community and very aware that antisemitism is real in this world. I experienced it and saw others experience it. I was taught to beware of and resist antisemitism and all threats to justice that racist extremism creates in this world. I was also taught that, while the Jewish holocaust was unique in its horror, Jews are not the only ones who experience discrimination, hate, and horror; rather all oppressed people groups deserved protections and freedoms, not just Jews. This Jewish upbringing has led me into a life of activism on behalf of oppressed people everywhere.

I have been grieved for many years over life lost through continued violence in Palestine and Israel. Even more so over this past year. My Jewish activism leads me to critique the actions of the Israeli government. Never did I expect my activism, motivated by Jewish learning could be labeled antisemitic. But from my reading of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) "working definition" of antisemitism and the contemporary examples offered there, I fear that my opposition to the present Israeli aggression on Palestinians Gaza would be construed as antisemitic.

This is one reason I oppose the adoption of SB 297 with the codification of the IHRA definition of antisemitism. It conflates critique of Israeli state policy with antisemitism. This is dangerous to free speech and democracy. If IHRA is adopted, *any* form of criticism of Israel could be construed as antisemitic. This would delegitimize, and potentially even criminalize valid critique and protest of Israeli policies. In a democracy such as ours, critique of policy, state sponsored violence is a basic right and what makes democracy work.

I do applaud your attempt to fight antisemitism. But the IHRA definition of antisemitism simply conflates antisemitism and anti-Zionism; these are very different and equating or using these interchangeably distracts from the actual work of antisemitism. And the IHRA is not the only option. There are other choices if your desire is to create a stronger action against antisemitism. For example, The Jerusalem Declaration is an option which provides "clear guidance to identify and fight antisemitism while protecting free expression." Adoption of the IHRA definition as law distorts the definition of antisemitism and simply serves to shield Israel from all criticism and accountability for its actions. The absence of state accountability only enables the kinds of atrocities to be done to others that this Jew says should *never again* happen to us, or anyone!

Sincerely,
Wendy Bilgen
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

