

Testimony in Opposition to Adoption of IHRA Definition of Antisemitism in SB 297

Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee

December 11th, 2024

Written Testimony in 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,

My name is Tal Shutkin and I am a Jewish constituent here in Columbus, Ohio. I grew up on the east side of Cleveland very much part of the vibrant Jewish community, was enrolled in Jewish day school through the 8th grade and regularly attended two synagogues in Cleveland Heights and Beachwood. I speak today to express my strong opposition against the proposed Senate Bill 297, which would codify the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition (IHRA definition) of antisemitism into Ohio law. As is abundantly clear from the recent neo-Nazi march through downtown Columbus, the issue of antisemitism is always just below the surface even here in central Ohio. But the cynical definition from the IHRA does little to protect Jews from legitimate threats of antisemitism. Instead, it provides ammunition for those wishing to persecute vocal critics of the Israeli state and its activities. As it cynically construes as antisemitic the Palestinian community's advocacy for their own dignity, this bill paints the protection of minorities in Ohio as a zero-sum game. The reality is quite the opposite: we all need each other in the fight against the growing threats of hatred and intolerance.

A common misconception about the proposed definition is that it does not categorize criticism of Israeli policy as antisemitic, only criticism of the existence of Israel as an ethno-state. While it is important to note that neither of these things are antisemitic, the IHRA definition adopted by SB 297 would go so far as to consider comparisons of Israeli actions (policy) with fascism to be antisemitic. This severely limits freedom of speech generally and makes for a very precarious situation for Jews, where our safety is conditioned on supporting not only Israel's existence as an ethnically exclusive nation state, but it's blatantly and increasingly fascist actions. There is little I value more than my heritage and identity as a Jewish person, yet if passed, this bill would characterize me as an antisemite.

The IHRA definition is vague enough to facilitate the curtailment of democratic freedoms of speech in Ohio, but in some instances overly specific as to reveal its aim not to protect Jews against antisemitism, but to protect Israel against democratic deliberation. The IHRA Definition includes 11 examples of antisemitism, 7 of which focus on the State of Israel. And yet, according to the latest report from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), an organization widely viewed as having a severe pro-Israel bias, 49% of antisemitic incidents in the country in 2023 had nothing to do with Israel. In response to the IHRA definition's simultaneous vagueness and over-specificity, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism was developed by experts on the topic to offer a more concrete and nuanced position on the relation between discourse surrounding Palestine, Israel, and antisemitism. Reanalyzed using the Jerusalem definition, the ADL report reveals that the White Nationalist movement, including the masked neo-Nazis we all saw

marching through Columbus, was the source of 1200 antisemitic incidents in 2023, making it the most significant single threat to American Jews.

If the Ohio general assembly genuinely wishes to protect American Jews against antisemitism, it must consider alternative definitions that are consistent with the realities of antisemitism in America. What it must not do is tell the Jewish community of Ohio that we only matter to you if we support what Israel is doing now and for decades to the Palestinian people.

Will you vote to adopt this resolution telling Jews that our only path to safety is at the expense of others; or will you vote to reject it and strive for a vision of safety that includes the Jewish community along with all our neighbors, including Palestinians? I implore you to choose the latter option.

Tal Shutkin
Columbus, OH
Dec 9, 2024