

Opposing Testimony for Senate Bill 297
Senate Judiciary Committee
Submitted December 9, 2024

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

I submit this written testimony to you as both a Jewish Anti-Zionist, and a deeply concerned Ohio Resident. I ask you to oppose Senate Bill 297, which would limit free speech, dangerously conflate anti-Zionism and antisemitism, and criminalize dissent.

Through codifying the IHRA definition of antisemitism into law, this bill would categorize legitimate criticism of the state of Israel, and the egregious human rights violations committed by its government and military, as hate speech. I am an Ohioan who condemns the state of Israel for enforcing apartheid, as ruled by the [International Court of Justice](#), and for committing genocide, as recently determined by [Amnesty International](#). If Senate Bill 297 is passed, my decision to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people by opposing Israel could be considered antisemitic. As a Jewish person, I find this offensive, reprehensible, and alarming.

I grew up in the Jewish community in Cincinnati. I attended a local synagogue, went to Jewish camp for seven summers, and served on the regional board of my Jewish youth group. Judaism centers discourse. In the Pirkei Avot, our rabbis teach us the value of a controversy that is “for the sake of Heaven.” Debate, dialogue, and critique for the greater good is of the utmost importance. We live in a constant state of urgency. As you consider this bill, Israel continues its relentless military campaign against the people of Gaza and the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank.

I write this testimony on Monday, December 9. Yesterday, [Israeli forces killed 50 people and injured 94 others](#) in Gaza, through a drone attack on the Jabalia refugee camp, a strike on people waiting in line for flour in Rafah, and a bombing of a residential building in the Bureij refugee camp. We must be permitted to speak freely about the atrocities being committed in Gaza without being labeled as hateful. We must be able to protest against the atrocities being committed in Gaza without being prosecuted as rioters.

As a Jewish person, the Torah commands me to be relentless in the pursuit of righteousness. It is not righteous to prohibit advocacy for the people of Palestine through passing SB 297. It is also not righteous to enact the dangerous conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism into law. The IHRA definition lacks the vital distinction between the two. The [Jerusalem Declaration](#) responds to this gap in order to strengthen the fight against antisemitism.

The Jerusalem declaration outlines antisemitic acts such as making negative generalizations, reproducing antisemitic symbols such as the swastika, using discriminatory hiring practices, denying the Holocaust, and promoting conspiracy theories that link all Jewish people to the forces of evil. This definition also clarifies that the opposition of Zionism as an ideology and any evidenced-based criticism of Israel is not antisemitic. Co-signed by a diverse range of distinguished scholars, The Jerusalem Declaration could be considered as an alternative guideline to reinforce the protection of Jewish people.

To quote [Jewish Voice for Peace](#), a progressive Jewish anti-Zionist organization, “Zionism suggests Jews require a supremacist nation state to answer the real question of Jewish safety. We believe that everywhere in the world, Jews belong and should be safe.” Through conflating antisemitism and anti-Zionism, SB 297 endorses Zionism, and spreads the message that as a Jew, I can never be truly safe outside of Israel, even in my home state of Ohio.

I am deeply disturbed by the rise of white supremacist anti-semitism in the United States. As you are all aware, Neo-Nazis recently [marched through Columbus](#) shouting slurs and carrying swastika flags. The rise of hate and racism demonstrated by this event must be condemned. By placing legitimate protest against the state of Israel in the same category as actual antisemitism, SB 297 deflects focus from the urgent work that must be done to protect marginalized groups from discrimination and violence.

This bill exploits the suffering of my people in order to silence the voices of Pro-Palestine activists. If enacted, authorities could use this bill to criminalize civil disobedience. This legislation would label the diverse coalition of Ohians standing for justice in Palestine, which includes Jewish people such as myself, as antisemitic. I urge you to use your vote to stand for free speech, democracy, and the ability of the people to hold politicians accountable. Please oppose SB 297 and support those speaking up for Palestinians. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Bettina Ernst