

Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee

December 9, 2024

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

Dear Members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee,

I am writing to you as a resident of Cleveland Heights and as a Jew to urge you not to adopt the IHRA definition and examples of antisemitism. The IHRA's examples are largely centered around the premise that being critical of Israel is antisemitic. This is inaccurate, it is offensive, and it would only be used to censor free speech.

I have been trying to figure out how one can possibly construe antizionism as antisemitism and I have come up with two possibilities.

The first is that there is a misguided belief it is antisemitic to criticize a Jew. Since Israel is made up of Jews, criticizing it would be antisemitic as well, from this perspective. By this standard, a Jew is free to do literally anything without penalty - a Jew in Ohio can rob a bank or commit mass murder without anyone being able to say a word against it. This is, of course, entirely illogical. Stating facts is not hate speech and calling for sanctions against those who would commit genocide is not violence.

My only other theory on how one could consider criticism of Israel to be antisemitic is if one believes that Israel is somehow central to Judaism or to the Jewish people, and therefore to criticize Israel is to criticize our very identity as Jews. To me, this is an incredibly offensive premise. First of all, the Jewish people and religion are thousands of years old, while Israel was only founded in 1948. Secondly, Israel is a colonial, apartheid state that is committing a genocide. This has all been recognized by many respected international institutions such as Amnesty International and the United Nations. Therefore, when one says that Israel is a central part of Jewish identity, they are saying that colonialism, apartheid, and genocide are Jewish values. They are saying that killing children¹, burning hospital patients alive², intentionally starving a whole people³, and forcing civilians from their homes⁴ are all central tenants of Judaism. This is as offensive as it is false. Jews may be doing this, but it is not *because* they are Jews. Given that Israel's actions have nothing to do with Judaism or Jewishness, I do not see how it can be viewed as antisemitic to criticize Israel.

I'll tell you what's central to *my* Jewish identity: we stand with the oppressed, wherever they may be. We remember what we ourselves have faced and we say, 'never again – not for anyone.' And yet, if this bill were passed, I could be penalized for doing so. I - a Jew - could be punished for antisemitism for every word I have written here. I can only imagine that if this bill is passed, people throughout the state will be thus punished for exercising their freedom of speech. I have also been paying attention to who's speech is being silenced in my own community of Greater Cleveland – sometimes with the blatantly false guise of protecting Jews. The patterns I see make it hard to imagine that this bill – which claims to be for the purpose of protecting people from hate – will not be implemented in a discriminatory manner, used to target Palestinian, Muslim, and Black Americans far more often than anyone else.

Punishing my Palestinian friends for speaking out will not keep me safe as a Jew. Being threatened for speaking my mind will not keep me safe as a Jew.

I am writing to tell you: not in my name. Not in Israel; not here in Ohio.

I urge you not to adopt a definition of antisemitism that labels those who speak out against genocide as being the same as neo-Nazis. Instead, I suggest that you adopt a definition that considers multiple perspectives and understands the dangers of conflating antizionism with antisemitism, such as the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. It is also imperative that you provide equal protections for other groups facing hate, such as Palestinian, Muslim, and Black Americans.

Sincerely,

Sezny Watkins

1.



“Photos: Israel’s War on Gaza’s Children.” *Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 28 Dec. 2023, www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/12/28/photos-gaza-children.

2.



Ajose, Toyibat. "Shaban Al-Dalou: Relatives of Burned Palestinian Youth Describe Incident." *News Central*, 17 Oct. 2024, newscentral.africa/relatives-of-burned-palestinian-youth-shaban-al-dalou-describe-aftermath-of-israeli-strike/

3.



"Gaza: Israel's Imposed Starvation Deadly for Children." *Human Rights Watch*, 9 Apr. 2024, www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/09/gaza-israels-imposed-starvation-deadly-children.

4.



al-Mughrabi, Nidal, and Mohammad Salem. "Rainstorms Flood Tents of Gaza's Displaced as Israel Steps up Strikes." *MSN*, 25 Nov. 2024, www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/rainstorms-flood-tents-of-gazas-displaced-as-israel-steps-up-strikes/ar-AA1uIFfU?ocid=BingNewsSerp.