

My Statement

Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I strongly oppose Senate Bill 297 (SB 297) as it threatens free speech, suppresses dissent, and sets a dangerous precedent by criminalizing legitimate political discourse. By adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, this bill conflates criticism of Israeli policies with hate speech. This will harm our ability as citizens to engage in activism, academic freedom, and peaceful protest. While combating antisemitism is essential, this broad definition risks silencing voices advocating for Palestinian rights and undermines First Amendment protections.

Instead of helping us combat antisemitism, a strong case can be made that the IHRA definition of antisemitism is in of itself antisemitic because it conflates Judaism, a religion, with Israel, a state. This would be no different than if a legislator crafted a bill with the stated aim of combating anti-black racism and then went on to state that criticizing basketball or the NBA is anti-black. Conflating a sport (basketball) with a race of people (African-Americans) is as ignorant as conflating a government (Israel) with a religion (Judaism). According to virtually every major human rights organisation Israel is an apartheid state and according to the International Criminal Court it's plausible that it is committing a genocide in Gaza. The politicians who support SB 297 are hurting the American Jewish community by promoting a definition of antisemitism that links their community to a rogue state engaging in apartheid and genocide. I fear this conflation will have the opposite effect and instead increase antisemitism.

The bill's expansion of "ethnic intimidation" to include riots and aggravated riots further criminalizes peaceful protest. Under vague definitions, demonstrations involving five or more individuals could be mischaracterized as "riots," subjecting activists to harsh penalties and increased surveillance. This selective enforcement disproportionately targets marginalized communities, including Muslim and Arab organizers, creating systemic barriers to advocacy and free expression.

I unequivocally condemn antisemitism, but SB 297 is not the solution. I urge you to reject this bill, which stifles legitimate political discourse and undermines fundamental rights. Instead, lawmakers should adopt a precise definition of antisemitism that protects against hate without criminalizing dissent or advocacy for justice. Protecting free speech and upholding constitutional rights is critical to ensuring a democratic and just society.