

Silenced In Our Name

A Jewish Commentary on Canada's IHRA Handbook



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Introduction

Canadians are watching in horror as the United States, under Donald Trump's leadership, veers toward outright fascism. This far-right authoritarian turn has targeted numerous communities and causes—from queer and trans people, to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs, to Latine migrants. Also high on the Trump regime's hit list: supporters of Palestinian liberation.

Since October 2023, primarily US-armed Israeli forces have killed over 50,000 Palestinians. In response, unprecedented levels of repression have been directed at those who speak out. Supporters of Palestinian liberation in the U.S. have faced high-profile deportations, job losses, travel bans, and academic suspensions. Though frequently done in the name of "Jewish safety", Jewish-American critics of Israel have been targeted all the same. And there are growing fears the crackdown is only just beginning.

Canada is not immune. Pro-Palestinian activists here have also faced repression—through pre-dawn, violent arrests, spurious accusations of antisemitism from political leaders, and broader efforts to silence criticism of Israel. As Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) has [documented](#), repression of Palestine solidarity in Canada is nothing new. But the current climate—marked by mass mobilizations in support of Palestinian freedom and severe backlash by both the state and pro-Israel lobby groups—represents an alarming escalation. For the BC Civil Liberties Association, what we are experiencing is nothing short of a ["watershed moment of peril for our civil liberties in Canada."](#)

While the tactics of repression may differ between the U.S. and Canada, they often share a common foundation: the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\) Working Definition of Antisemitism](#).

What is the IHRA working definition of antisemitism?

First published in 2016, the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism has become a key tool used by Israel, pro-Israel advocacy groups and Western governments to silence criticism of Israeli policies. While presented as a framework for identifying antisemitism, the definition conflates opposition to Israel and Zionism with hatred of Jews. As a result, it fuels anti-Palestinian racism and distracts from real antisemitism.

By framing resistance to Israeli apartheid and genocide as a form of “Jew-hatred,” the IHRA definition creates a chilling environment where calls for Palestinian rights are framed as discriminatory. This is what advocates of the definition often refer to as “the new antisemitism.”

In 2019, Canada adopted the IHRA definition federally as part of its Anti-Racism Strategy. Since then, it has been embraced by several provinces and municipalities, even as it has been rejected by dozens of institutions across Canada and internationally, in addition to many of the world’s most respected scholars of antisemitism, Holocaust studies, modern Jewish history and related fields. More recently, there are signs that government bodies are moving beyond symbolic endorsement—integrating IHRA into decision-making processes such as federal grant funding for anti-racism and multiculturalism initiatives.

The IHRA definition is being used to silence speech on Palestine across the globe. In recent years, there has been a surge of bad-faith complaints of antisemitism and lawsuits against Palestine solidarity on U.S. campuses. Virtually all of these accusations, writes Lara Friedman of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, rely on the IHRA definition to weaponize antisemitism. A 2023 report by the European Legal Support Center and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies reviewed 40 such cases in UK universities from 2017 to 2022; all but two, which are ongoing, were eventually dismissed by university authorities. IHRA is being wielded internationally to stifle free speech, and the Canadian Handbook is poised to increase this repressive push here.

What is the Canadian Handbook?

On January 27, 2022, former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day by announcing his government would develop a handbook to “support the adoption, understanding, and practical use” of the IHRA definition across Canada. That promise was fulfilled nearly three years later with the October 2024 release of the *Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism*.

The 56-page handbook was published by the Office of the Special Envoy for Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism, Deborah Lyons. Not Jewish herself, Lyons self-identifies as a Zionist and has a history of misrepresenting pro-Palestinian slogans and activism as antisemitic. The Handbook’s primary author is commercial and civil litigation lawyer Noah Lew, known widely for making discredited allegations of antisemitism during his time at McGill University.

The Handbook is designed to guide government agencies, businesses, law enforcement, and civil society organizations in applying the IHRA definition to their policies and programs. In effect, it provides a roadmap for institutionalizing the IHRA framework across Canadian public life.

Why is the Handbook dangerous?

Rather than combating antisemitism, Canada's IHRA Handbook threatens freedom of expression—especially when it comes to Palestinian human rights. It ignores the outsized role of far-right and white supremacist groups in contributing to antisemitism, and instead perpetuates anti-Palestinian racism (APR) by equating criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism.

The Arab Canadian Lawyers Association (ACLA) defines APR as “a form of anti-Arab racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames or dehumanizes Palestinians or their narratives.” APR includes actions such as denying the Nakba, justifying violence against Palestinians, or branding Palestinians and their allies as inherently antisemitic or supportive of terrorism. By this measure, the IHRA definition—and tools like the Handbook used to enforce it—are themselves manifestations of APR.

One of the most dangerous elements of IHRA is the claim that calling Israel a “racist endeavor” is antisemitic. This positions virtually all Palestinians—and countless anti-Zionists, including many Jews—as antisemites for opposing an apartheid system that privileges Jewish Israelis at the expense of Palestinians. It also erases long-standing acknowledgment, even by the father of Zionism Theodor Herzl, that the Zionist project is a settler-colonial one. Herzl himself described it as “something colonial,” envisioning the Jewish state as “an outpost of civilization against barbarism.”

The IHRA Handbook also perpetuates discrimination against Jews by tying Jewish identity to the actions of the Israeli state, reinforcing antisemitic tropes around dual loyalty and collective responsibility. It erases vibrant Jewish debate on the question of Zionism—including anti-, non-, cultural-, post- and even Liberal Zionist traditions—and isolates antisemitism from broader systems of white supremacy and racism.

Ultimately, the IHRA definition and Canada's Handbook are not about fighting antisemitism. They are instruments of censorship and repression, weaponized to silence solidarity with Palestinians and to shield Israel from accountability.

What is IJV's commentary?

This commentary offers a section-by-section critique of [Canada's IHRA Handbook](#). It does not cover the whole text, but rather zeroes in on what we believe to be its most dangerous and troubling passages. It is intended for anyone concerned about the spread of IHRA in Canadian workplaces, institutions, and communities. Rather than revisiting the full IHRA definition (which is covered in depth elsewhere), this text focuses on what is distinct about the Canadian Handbook.

For more background, we recommend the following IJV resources:

- [How NOT to Fight Antisemitism: A Critique of the IHRA Definition](#)
- [Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada](#)

Additional resources, including alternative resources to fight and understand antisemitism, are listed in the Appendix.

This document can be read on its own or alongside the Handbook. Our goal is to provide a Jewish perspective on why IHRA and Canada's IHRA Handbook are the wrong tools to fight antisemitism.

Breaking Down the IHRA Handbook

Disclaimer

The Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism does not supersede, modify, or direct an interpretation of any existing federal, provincial, or municipal statute or regulation. It does not constitute a binding directive on any government department or agency requiring the IHRA Definition to be implemented or used in a particular manner.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 1

The IHRA Handbook opens with a disclaimer: like the definition itself, it is officially non-legally binding. In theory, this means it should carry no force of law and cannot be mandated. So why all the controversy?

The problem is that this disclaimer is deeply misleading. While the Handbook sometimes acknowledges its non-binding status, elsewhere it urges legal adoption—recommending, for example, that the IHRA definition be employed when “drafting jurisprudence.” This contradiction obscures one of the underlying goals of pro-IHRA advocates: to entrench the IHRA definition in legal and institutional frameworks.

Regardless of its formal legal standing, the Handbook is clearly designed to shape public understanding of antisemitism and influence institutional responses. Judges, law enforcement, employers, and government agencies may still use it as a reference, guiding decisions that suppress criticism of Israel. The result? An intensified chilling effect on speech and activism for Palestinian rights with intensified risk of damaging repercussions.

Yet this also creates an opening. Since it is not officially mandated, institutions can — and should — be pushed to reject the Handbook, recognizing the harms it perpetuates.

Introduction

This section lays out the history of the IHRA Handbook's creation, and gives a brief introduction to the IHRA definition itself. It briefly outlines practical use of IHRA in Canada and identifies areas where IHRA could be implemented. We will return to these points later on, when the Handbook discusses them in more depth.

Who are Jews?

This section prefaces the working definition of antisemitism by giving context on Jews and Jewish communities in Canada.

Here, the Handbook states that "a shared understanding of their origins in the land of Israel and longing to return" is intrinsic to all Jewish communities as a "core" aspect of Jewish identity. This argument relies on mixing ancient religious passages from Jewish scripture with contemporary Zionist politics. It misappropriates Jewish history to redefine all Jews as Indigenous to what today is called Israel.



Jewish peoplehood is core to Jewish identity and has been documented for thousands of years. Members of the Jewish community trace their origins back approximately 3000 years to the ancient lands of Israel and Judea.¹³ Indeed, the words 'Jew' and 'Jewish' derive from this ancient connection to that land. What links these diverse Jewish communities together over time and space are: (a) a common ancestry and shared history (b) a common set of texts that forms the basis of beliefs and practices and situates these within that history, and (c) a shared understanding of their origins in the land of Israel and longing to return.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 10

The Jewish people's connection to their indigenous homeland, the land of Israel, is the basis for **Zionism** – the belief that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland. This connection was recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution 181(II).¹⁵ The resolution reaffirmed the historical and ancestral ties of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, underscoring the legitimacy of their claim and the importance of their self-determination.¹⁶ The concept that the term Zionism describes dates back thousands of years. Modern political Zionism is built on the historical and religious connection to the land of Israel, leading to the establishment of the State of Israel. Most Jews around the world, while inevitably having diverse opinions on Israeli politics and policies, affirm Zionism as central to their Jewish identity.¹⁷ In Canada, approximately 91% of Canadian Jews believe Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish state – the essence of Zionism.¹⁸

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 11

The Handbook's attempt to define Jewish identity is dangerous and misleading. At its core, it falsely claims that all Jews are inherently Indigenous to Israel, using this as a justification for Zionism and as a tool to silence anti-Zionist voices, regardless of whether or not they are Jewish. This redefinition not only misrepresents indigeneity, by conflating biblical ties to the region with the current nation state of Israel, but also conflates Jewish identity with Zionism, labeling any opposition to Zionism (including by Jews themselves) as antisemitic.

By stating that most Jews "affirm Zionism as central to their Jewish identity," it erases the diversity of Jewish beliefs and traditions around the world. It reduces Jews to essentially a single, monolithic group. In reality, Canadian Jewish opinions on Israel and Zionism are varied and shifting every day—a fact that the Handbook ignores outright. A [recent survey](#) showed that only half of Canadian Jews identify as Zionist, with 27% saying they do not. This undermines the Handbook's reliance on the confusing metric of "belief in Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state", a statement which can be interpreted in many different ways.

Antisemitism in Canada

In 2024, Jews in Canada are facing an unprecedented level of antisemitism – in schools, on campuses, in workplaces, in their communities, in the streets, and online.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 11

The Handbook claims that Canadian Jews faced “unprecedented” antisemitism in 2024. This is based on a 2022 report by the U.S. Helsinki Commission on antisemitism in Europe, and Statistics Canada’s report on police-reported hate crimes.

It is difficult to take this claim at face value, given the history of state-sanctioned discrimination that Jews have endured in this country. Throughout the early 20th century, Jews were barred from many social clubs and resorts, universities imposed quotas on Jewish applicants, hospitals refused to hire Jewish doctors, and restrictive covenants precluded Jewish homeownership in certain areas. The Canadian government held an infamous “none is too many” immigration policy for Jews. This policy doomed Jewish refugees aboard the St. Louis, when more than 900 Jews fleeing Nazi persecution were denied entry into Canada, and were forced to return to Nazi-occupied Europe. It is important to remember this history of systemic and state-sanctioned antisemitism in order to counter misleading claims that we face “unprecedented” antisemitism today.

Antisemitism remains a persistent issue in Canada, manifesting through toxic conspiracy theories, hate speech and vandalism and, alarmingly as of late, violent attacks on synagogues and Jewish schools. While these realities are deeply concerning and must be confronted, the scale and nature of antisemitism today differ from the systemic discrimination and exclusion faced in the past. In the past, antisemitism was a structural form of racism that had institutional support. It currently is not a form of structural inequality because it is not found in law, legal structures, policies, or practices of the state and other institutions. Exaggerating the threat creates unnecessary fear within Jewish communities and obscures a more nuanced understanding of the challenges we face. It can also lead to exaggerated and misplaced responses, notably from far-right groups to Palestinians and their supporters.

Despite the evolution of societal norms and significant efforts to combat antisemitism through education, legislation, and advocacy, antisemitism remains prevalent in Canadian society. As reported by Statistics Canada, religiously motivated hate crimes against Jewish people have risen each year since 2010, such that by 2023, Jews experienced over 70% of all religiously motivated hate crimes, despite only being approximately one percent of the Canadian population.²³

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 12

Using official hate crime statistics is a misleading way of understanding the prevalence of hate-motivated violence, and leaves out important context for understanding the frequency of antisemitic acts in the country. According to the Canadian government, around 80% of hate crimes in Canada are not reported, going as high as 95% for some crimes. Under-reporting is most frequent among racialized and Indigenous communities, who are vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse at the hands of police, and may fear further harm while reporting.

In contrast, Jewish Canadians—most of whom are white or white-passing—are believed to report hate crimes to police at proportionally higher rates, aided by well-established community organizations that encourage reporting in the absence of systemic discrimination which might deter them. Without acknowledging this reporting disparity, hate crime statistics present a distorted picture of victimization across minority groups, leading to misguided policy and police responses. The very publication of this Handbook, the only such document mandated by ex-Prime Minister Trudeau to combat a form of racism, is but a case in point. We therefore caution strongly against taking these figures as an accurate description of on-the-ground realities.

A new variant of antisemitic atrocity denial emerged in the wake of the October 7th Hamas terrorist attacks – the deadliest day for Jewish people since the Holocaust. The October 7th atrocities have been met by some with denial, minimization, and distortion – echoing Holocaust denial, minimization, and distortion. The depraved nature of the October 7th attacks invoked the horrors of the Holocaust, triggering intergenerational trauma in the Jewish community.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 12

When describing the history of antisemitism in Canada and how it manifests today, the Handbook focuses almost exclusively on the events of October 7th, using them as part of a larger framing to vilify Palestinians and the Palestinian solidarity movement, ultimately providing justification for the ongoing genocide. At no point does the Handbook mention the rising global tide of neo-Nazism, white nationalism, and the far right—ideologies that continue to pose an immense threat to Jewish (and other targeted) communities today.

Indeed, according to a [2024 report of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service \(CSIS\)](#), "Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremists", including far-right groups, "routinely weave antisemitic commentary into their narratives in order to inspire violence and recruit individuals." This is notably not the case for pro-Palestinian protests and university encampments, which the report claims "are unlikely to lead to or be staging grounds for violent extremist acts".

These omissions show that the Handbook is less concerned with combating antisemitism than with silencing criticism of Israeli apartheid, illegal occupation and genocide of Palestinians. They also serve to separate Jews from other victims of white supremacy, closing the door to opportunities for joint struggle across community lines.

As with other marginalized communities, **Jews have the right to define their own oppression.** To understand antisemitism in Canada, how it manifests, and how it impacts Canadian Jews, it is important to listen to and promote the voices of Canadian Jews. At the same time, it is important to be wary of tokenization – it is possible for Jews themselves to contribute to and empower antisemitism. Canada's largest Jewish organizations, representing the majority of Canadian Jews, support the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance ("**IHRA**")²⁴ Working Definition of Antisemitism ("**IHRA Definition**"),²⁵ the leading definition of antisemitism worldwide.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 12

The Handbook dismisses Canadian Jews who oppose IHRA as mere "tokenized Jews"—a term that aims to delegitimize their voices by implying that a "real" Jew must support the Israeli state. In doing so, it takes an authoritarian turn, granting the Canadian government the power to police Jewish identity based on political beliefs. It weaponizes its language to silence longstanding Jewish traditions of solidarity with Palestinians, promoting a narrow, exclusionary vision of Jewishness that stigmatizes those who stand with the oppressed.

History of the IHRA Definition

The Handbook misrepresents the adoption of the IHRA definition by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), portraying it as a product of democratic processes aimed at combating global antisemitism. In reality, the definition was heavily lobbied for, especially by Israel and well-funded pro-Israel groups. Furthermore, the Handbook wrongly treats the 11 controversial illustrative examples as integral to the IHRA definition, when in fact they were never formally adopted as part of the definition due to disagreements among member states.

In the present era, where human rights are the highest source of authority, antisemitism is often justified under the guise of human rights. For example, the portrayal of Jewish Israelis as genocidal, settler-colonial, apartheidist oppressors has been repeatedly used to justify violence against, as well as the hostage-taking of, Israeli civilians, including Israeli-Canadians.³⁴

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 18

The Handbook goes well beyond the IHRA definition by labeling descriptions of Israelis as “genocidal, settler-colonial, apartheidist oppressors” as antisemitic. This move echoes the Israeli government’s ongoing defiance of international law and its attacks on the international institutions that defend human rights.

By framing appeals to human rights and international law as antisemitic dog whistles, the Handbook dangerously pits the fight against antisemitism against the struggle for universal human rights. It also undermines one of the IHRA definition’s more sensible “illustrative examples”: that it is antisemitic to hold all Jews collectively responsible for the actions of the Israeli state.

The IHRA Definition Explained

The Illustrative Examples

The IHRA working definition of antisemitism relies heavily upon IHRA’s 11 so-called “illustrative examples” of antisemitism, since the definition itself is incredibly vague and difficult to make use of on its own. The Handbook expands on each of these examples, further conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism. It also introduces Canada-specific cases to illustrate each example—some of which are legitimate instances of antisemitism, while others are simply criticisms of Israel or Zionism. We focus here on four of them.

Example 7: Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.

Arguably the most controversial of the examples, the section of the Handbook devoted to it is especially objectionable.

To selectively deny the Jewish people the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland is antisemitic. Similarly, it is antisemitic to deny the indigeneity and continuous religious and historic ties of Jews to the land of Israel, which underlies that right.⁶¹

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 29

Here, the Handbook preempts questions of Jews' relationship to Palestine, a matter of legitimate political and academic debate whose parameters cannot be determined by the Canadian government. The Handbook's insistence on Jewish indigeneity to Israel whitewashes the violent history of Israel's founding and the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Palestinian lands.

Importantly, the belief that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland (the land of Israel) is known as **Zionism**.⁶² Those who believe in the right of Jewish people to self-determination in the land of Israel are known as **Zionists**. Although the term Zionism was created in the 1800s, the concept it describes existed long before the term itself. Indeed, while the Jewish people lacked sovereignty and autonomy in the land of Israel for almost 2000 years (~73 to 1948 AD), they maintained a consistent presence in and connection with Israel, and a longing to return to their homeland. This connection is deeply entrenched in Jewish religion, culture, traditions and beliefs. While not all Jews are Zionists, and not all Zionists are Jews, the two are intrinsically linked and substantially overlapping. As mentioned previously, the majority of Canadian Jews support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state – with studies having found over 90% to be in favour.⁶³

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 29

This section both misrepresents what Zionism is and who Zionists are. Zionism is a modern political ideology, popularized in response to European antisemitism, yet inextricably tied to European settler colonialism and imperial expansion. Its founders modeled their proposal for a Jewish state on

previous examples of settler-colonization, relying on land dispossession and ethnic cleansing to impose a Jewish demographic majority. Zionism appropriated the ancient Jewish relationship to the Land of Israel as a justification for colonization. However, this cultural and religious connection predates Zionism by centuries and neither necessitates nor legitimizes it.

This section also fails to acknowledge who the majority of Zionists are, and what their interest in Zionism is. Globally, the majority of Zionists are Christian. Christian Zionists tend to align themselves politically with the far right, and are often sympathetic to, if not supporters of, antisemitic ideas and conspiracy theories. The largest Zionist organization in the world is US-based Christians United for Israel, which claims to have 10 million members or roughly two-thirds the number of Jews in the entire world. Its founder and chairman, John Hagee, has notably suggested that God sent Hitler to push Jews to the promised land and create the Israeli state, and that Hurricane Katrina was on account of God's wrath in response to a planned gay pride parade.

As with all of the Illustrative Examples, it is important to read and interpret this example in the context of the Core Definition, the Preamble, and the Postscript. Additionally, it is important to understand that the recognition of Jewish indigeneity and the right of Jewish people to self-determination in the land of Israel does not negate the right of self-determination for the Palestinians or others on that land.⁶⁴ In contrast, it reinforces the right for self-determination of all peoples under international law. peoples under international law.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 30

This is a clear distortion of Israel's long record of severe human rights abuses and its ongoing denial of Palestinian self-determination. Israel has never respected Palestinians' right to self-determination, beginning with the country's founding through ethnic cleansing intended to secure a Jewish demographic majority. The apartheid system it has instituted not only denies that right in multiple ways but also constitutes a crime against humanity. The Handbook's portrayal of Israel as embodying Indigenous self-determination is a gross misrepresentation. This common pro-Israel talking point reframes the displacement of Palestinians—the Indigenous population—as an anti-colonial victory, obscuring the reality of Jewish settler colonialism in the region.

Canada (December, 2023): A post made on Instagram claimed that “you can’t be antiracist and Zionist” and that “Zionism is a racist & violent settler-colonial project...”



Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 30

This post is presented as a Canada-specific case study of antisemitism. It is perhaps the clearest example of the Handbook conflating legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism.

Debates over whether Zionism is racist or whether Israel functions as a violent settler-colonial state engaged in ethnic cleansing and genocide are precisely the kinds of political discourse protected under Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Yet the Handbook doesn't just take a side—it seeks to silence the position supported by a growing consensus of credible experts.

In the months before the Handbook’s release, the International Court of Justice found that Israel’s actions in Gaza plausibly constitute genocide and ordered an end to its illegal occupation and practices of racial discrimination. Leading human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, go further—arguing categorically that Israel is committing the crimes against humanity of genocide and apartheid.

The Handbook’s attempt to reframe these well-founded criticisms as antisemitism is not only disingenuous—it’s a direct threat to free expression and accountability.

Example 8: Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.

Ottawa, ON (April, 2024): A post made on Instagram in the context of the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict claimed that "Zionist genocide is the greatest act of aggression. It is the root-cause of the violence." Laying the sole responsibility on Israel and blaming Zionism for being the root cause of the violence negates the unprovoked atrocities that happened on October 7 and the fact that Israel as a democratic state, like all others, has the right to defend itself during a time of war.⁶⁷

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 32

The post quoted in this case study is clearly a piece of political analysis—whether one agrees with it or not. Contrary to the claim that it lays "sole responsibility on Israel," it argues that Israel and Zionism bear greater responsibility. The Handbook's commentary also obscures critical facts. A state that rules over millions of non-citizens without equal rights cannot be credibly described as "a democratic state like any other." And under international law, Israel, as an occupying power, cannot claim a blanket right to self-defence against a population it controls.

Example 9: Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.

The application of classical antisemitism to Israel and Israelis has included claims that Israel is responsible for terrorist attacks, pandemics, and police brutality in North America.⁶⁸ It also sometimes involves the adaptation of the "blood libel,"⁶⁹ such as accusing Israel or Israelis of being "child murderers" and "organ thieves." In addition, the application of classical antisemitic tropes to Israelis may take the form of characterizing them all as "white," as "white supremacists," or as "colonizers." Notably, the majority of Jewish Israelis are of Middle Eastern and North African (Mizrahi) descent.⁷⁰ These characterizations erase the Jewish indigenous connection to the land of Israel and the diversity of Israelis, while simultaneously demonizing and dehumanizing them.⁷¹

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 32

This selection exemplifies how the handbook intertwines real instances of antisemitism with criticism of Israel that is not antisemitic. It is an antisemitic conspiracy theory that Jews at large or Israel specifically is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is not a conspiracy theory to link Israel with police brutality in North America, when multiple activist groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace have demonstrated that U.S. Police departments regularly hire Israeli military officials to train American police officers in violent policing tactics.

Additionally, this section misapplies existing antisemitic tropes to current demands that Israel stop its genocide in Gaza. Blood libel is a real antisemitic trope. However, protesting Israel for killing children and many other innocent civilians, especially during its genocidal assault on civilians in Gaza, is not blood libel, and is not antisemitic. It is a statement of fact based on credible evidence. Framing this kind of speech as antisemitic is dehumanizing to the Palestinians who are being murdered, and whitewashes crimes against humanity.

Finally, this section makes the dangerous claim that describing Israel as white supremacist or colonizing is an antisemitic slur. Large bodies of scholarship have documented white supremacist racism within Israel, and historians have shown how Israel was founded through settler-colonialism. Today, that colonial project continues in settlements in the West Bank, where illegal settlers are actively occupying, stealing, and colonizing Palestinian lands. Rebranding these accurate descriptions of power structures, prejudices, and theft of Palestinian land as “antisemitic” severely limits our ability to accurately describe what is happening in Palestine and Israel. It also serves the interest of any colonial power to rebrand “colonizer” as a slur.

Example 10: Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.

In this form of antisemitic discrimination, Israel and Jews are now portrayed as Nazi-like perpetrators of mass atrocities and genocide. This is also known as Holocaust inversion. Among other inspirations, Holocaust inversion has origins in Soviet-era propaganda and Soviet anti-Zionism.⁷³ These comparisons often form a cycle of positive reinforcement with Holocaust denial and minimization. They are especially harmful due to the intergenerational trauma from the Holocaust that many Jewish people carry.

Comparing Israel, Israelis, and Jews to the Nazis also serves to demonize and delegitimize them. It is a modern form of construing Jewish individuals and collectives as the worst imaginable evil, and helps to justify violence against Israel, Israelis, Jews and Jewish institutions.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 34

The Handbook is pre-determining here what kind of political critique and conversation is possible to have about a country currently committing genocide and illegal occupation. Prohibiting any comparison between the actions of Israel and the actions of Nazi Germany severely limits our ability to understand how and why genocide is committed. It is a sharp intensification on the limits placed on freedom of expression. Even respected Israeli thinkers, such as Orthodox Jewish philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz, warned of the moral consequences of the occupation, famously describing the emergence of a "Judeo-Nazi" mentality in Israel as early as the 1970s.

Practical Use of the IHRA Definition in the Canadian Context

IHRA is being used as a tool to suppress the Palestinian solidarity movement and potentially criminalize political activism in Canada. Below are examples of how the Handbook proposes its implementation across Canadian society.

Law Enforcement and Criminalization of Palestine Solidarity

- inform the development of staff (e.g. dispatch and report processing staff) training materials and educational materials;
- develop ongoing professional development training for law enforcement, in partnership with civil society organizations and Jewish community institutions; and,
- contribute to an increased understanding and awareness on the part of law enforcement professionals of the many and varied forms antisemitism may take and, by the same token, inform their thinking in identifying and recording hate incidents and crimes, in dispatch protocols, for the drafting of police reports, and for other tactical and strategic approaches to policing, including informing approaches to restorative justice measures.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 40

The Handbook encourages law enforcement to use the IHRA working definition to identify and track antisemitic hate crimes. Practically, this would mean that Palestinians and their allies could be targeted by police for legitimate speech or action that criticizes Israel and protests its actions. This would enable police to target activists and organizations speaking out against Israeli genocide and apartheid, leading to increased surveillance and the criminalization of dissent. It also risks increasing

militarized responses to peaceful protests. If police are encouraged to treat criticism of Israel as a form of hate speech against Jews rather than political activism, there will be an escalation of criminalization of Palestinian protest which will be used to further justify armed raids on activist homes and violent detainment and arrest of demonstrators.

The Legal System

- be used in developing the curriculum for lawyers and judges, starting in law schools;
- continue education for lawyers and judges, such as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions and materials;
- enhance awareness of the varied manifestations antisemitism can take;
- aid, in addition to existing law, practice and precedent, in the drafting of jurisprudence, hate crime legislation, human rights legislation, and soft law mechanisms.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 42

These recommended “best practices” are particularly striking in light of the Handbook’s disclaimer and the insistence that it and the definition are legally non-binding. After all, these recommendations are, in essence, encouraging lawyers and judges to read IHRA into law and legal frameworks. This would have dire legal consequences for individuals and organizations that oppose Israeli apartheid and genocide and advocate for Palestinian human rights. It would cultivate anti-Palestinian bias among judges and lawyers resulting in worsened outcomes for pro-Palestine advocates.

Education and Educational Institutions

For educators and educational institutions, practical use of the IHRA Definition can include:

- Using the definition to educate students, beginning at early ages and continuing through post-secondary;
- Using the definition to educate teachers, professionals in the field of education, and post-secondary professors and administrators on how to identify, record, and intervene against antisemitism;
- Incorporating the definition into EDI policies; and
- Incorporating the definition into school policies and campus codes of conduct – helping administrators and institutions draw the line as to what is and what is not antisemitism.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 43

The application of the IHRA definition in educational settings would severely restrict academic freedom. Here's how:

- **Curriculum restrictions:** The IHRA definition could be invoked to limit discussions about Israeli settler-colonialism, Zionism, the Nakba, and Palestinian experiences under Israeli occupation, labeling them as antisemitic. This would stifle critical thinking in classrooms, promote anti-Palestinian racism, and prevent students from engaging with this crucial history and present.
- **Targeting educators and students:** Teachers, professors, and students could be taught to identify "antisemitism" through the IHRA lens, with penalties for discussing topics like Zionism as a settler colonial ideology. University administrators would be encouraged to use the definition to target student organizations advocating for Palestinian rights or to police campus activism.
- **Institutional policy changes:** The adoption of the IHRA definition into school policies and codes of conduct would provide a legal framework for censoring student activism and academic inquiry, particularly if these activities challenge Israeli state policies or criticize Zionism.

Given the above, it is unsurprising that the IHRA definition has received near unanimous rejection by student and faculty groups in Canada, including the Canadian Federation of Students, the Canadian Association of University Teachers, over [40 faculty associations and academic unions](#), and [hundreds of individual faculty](#) including over [200 Jewish-Canadian faculty](#). It has also been rejected by the [University of Toronto](#), one of Canada's largest and most prestigious post-secondary institutions.

Government Programming

For government programming, practical use of the IHRA Definition can include:

- Using the definition in vetting procedures and control mechanisms when providing public funding;
- Using the definition to ensure that partner organizations seeking to combat antisemitism understand the lived realities of the people they are trying to help.

Good Practice Example: Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism Program

The Department of Canadian Heritage has implemented a number of measures, including attestations, to strengthen the programs that fall under Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy (Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism Program – MARP) to ensure that organizations and individuals that espouse racist, antisemitic and/or other forms of offensive content will not be eligible to receive funding under that program.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 43

Making IHRA a qualification for funding would severely limit the ability for organizations reliant on government grants to speak out in support of justice for Palestinians. IHRA could be used to effectively defund nonprofits and academic institutions that support Palestinian human rights and censor arts and culture projects critical of Israel.

The federal government has already indirectly made IHRA a condition for funding, through Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy, which is listed in the Handbook as a "Good Practice Example" of applying the IHRA definition. While currently confined to Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism Program funding, as far as we are aware, there is a risk that these conditions may be applied to other granting agencies as well. Should Pierre Poillievre and the Conservative Party of Canada have their way, federally-funded universities, museums and "all of those with a woke anti-Semitic agenda" risk being on the governments' chopping block.

Workplaces

- Incorporating the definition into codes of conduct, discrimination and harassment policies, and EDI policies;
- Ensuring that hiring and dismissal practices do not contravene the definition;
- Using the definition for continuing professional development, including EDI training; and
- Relying on the definition to identify, record, and intervene against instances of antisemitism in the workplace.

The Department of Canadian Heritage has implemented a number of measures, including attestations, to strengthen the programs that fall under Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy (Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism Program – MARP) to ensure that organizations and individuals that espouse racist, antisemitic and/or other forms of offensive content will not be eligible to receive funding under that program.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 44

Since October 2023, there have been many cases of workers facing disciplinary measures, including termination, for expressing support for Palestinians. This repression risks getting significantly worse on account of the Handbook's recommendation to adopt the IHRA definition in policies such as codes of conduct. Workers who speak out for Palestinian rights or criticize Zionism, may face disciplinary action, including termination. This fosters a hostile environment for those standing up for Palestinian liberation and silences political dissent in the workplace.

Civil Society

Generally, civil society organizations can use the IHRA Definition:

- To prevent, identify, and address antisemitic incidents within their organization;
- To prevent, identify, and address antisemitic incidents in their work – in the provision of services and programming, in advocacy and education

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 45

The application of the IHRA definition within civil society organizations would lead to the suppression of activities or individual employees working to support Palestinians, as well as harm caused on account of wrongful accusations of antisemitism.

- To support prevention work, such as developing training manuals and facilitating workshops to improve the competencies of professional groups (e.g. teachers and police) in recognizing and responding to antisemitism;
- To provide support services for victims of antisemitism, including legal and psychological counselling or intervening when expertise is needed;
- To guide the collection, analysis and publication of data on antisemitic incidents and crimes, as well as antisemitic movements or debates; and
- To provide a framework for monitoring online antisemitism and engaging with social media companies.

Canadian Handbook on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, page 45

Encouraging organizations to rely on the IHRA definition in the collection of data on antisemitic incidents would render said data highly unreliable and misleading. It would also artificially inflate levels of antisemitism in Canadian society by including speech and actions critical of Israel and Zionism, resulting in further stigmatization of support for Palestinians. This has notably long been a practice of B'nai Brith Canada, which has been [heavily critiqued](#) by IJV member and academic Sheryl Nestel, as well as by prominent sociologist Robert Brym.

Conclusion: The Threat to Free Expression & Solidarity

Ultimately, the adoption of the IHRA definition represents a significant threat to freedom of expression, academic inquiry, and political activism in Canada, at a time in which opposing Israel's crimes against humanity has never been more urgent. While antisemitism is a real and pressing issue, using the IHRA definition to target critics of Israel undermines both the fight against real antisemitism and the struggle for Palestinian liberation. By conflating criticism of Zionism with antisemitism, IHRA effectively criminalizes dissent and silences those who stand for human rights, equality, and justice.

Canada's IHRA Handbook represents a further effort to stifle the Palestinian solidarity movement and curtail free speech across multiple sectors—from law enforcement and the legal system to education, the arts, and civil society. We urge readers to reject the adoption and application of this harmful definition, including through the use of Canada's IHRA Handbook, as it undermines justice, academic freedom, and the right to protest.

Antisemitism is a real problem and must be fought in all its forms. But IHRA is not the way. The fight against antisemitism is inseparable from the struggles against other forms of racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy. The fight against antisemitism must be joined to the struggle for equality and human rights for all people, from Turtle Island to Palestine.

Appendix: Additional Resources

Resources to fight and understand antisemitism

- [IJV Working Definition of Antisemitism](#)
- [Principles for Dismantling Antisemitism](#)
- [Jerusalem Declaration of Antisemitism](#)
- [What is antisemitism? \(Diaspora Alliance\)](#)
- [Safety Through Solidarity: A Radical Guide to Fighting Antisemitism](#)
- [Understanding Antisemitism: An offering to our movement \(Jews for Racial and Economic Justice\)](#)

Resources to push back against the IHRA definition

- [No IHRA campaign \(IJV\)](#)
- [How NOT to Fight Antisemitism: A Critique of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism \(IJV\)](#)
- [Institutional Rejections of the IHRA definition \(IJV\)](#)
- [Toolkit: Demand “No IHRA” \(Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism\)](#)
- [The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism and Canadian Universities and Colleges: What You Need to Know \(Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism, Racism, Censorship and Colonialism in Canada\)](#)
- [IHRA’s True Intentions \(Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East\)](#)
- [Distorted Definition: Redefining Antisemitism to Silence Advocacy for Palestinian Rights \(Palestine Legal\)](#)
- [Human Rights and other Civil Society Groups Urge United Nations to Respect Human Rights in the Fight Against Antisemitism \(Human Rights Watch\)](#)

- [Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in UK Higher Education: The Adverse Impacts of the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism](#) (European Legal Support Center and British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)
- [Explainer: Arguments Against the IHRA Definition](#) (Diaspora Alliance)

Critical responses to Canada's IHRA Handbook

- [Canada's IHRA Handbook Threatens Both Palestinians and Jews](#) (IJV, Jewish Faculty Network Steering Committee and United Jewish People's Order)
- [NDP Statement on the Release of the IHRA Handbook](#)
- [Trudeau's 'IHRA handbook' will foster persecution of Palestine activism, must be withdrawn](#) (Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East)

Anti-Palestinian Racism and the suppression of speech on Palestine

- [Anti-Palestinian Racism: Naming, Framing and Manifestations](#) (Arab Canadian Lawyers Association)
- [Combating Anti-Palestinian Racism and Antisemitism: An Intersectional Approach to Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy](#) (CJPME, ACLA, Canadian Muslim Public Affairs Council, IJV)
- [Anti-Palestinian Racism in Canada 2024 Survey Report](#) (Palestinian Canadian Congress)
- [Anti-Palestinian Racism in Canada: 2023 Report](#) (CJPME)
- [Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada](#) (IJV)

Antisemitism education opportunities

- [Fighting Antisemitism With a Critical Thinking Lens](#) (IJV)
- [Curriculum on Antisemitism from a Framework of Collective Liberation](#) (PARCEO)
- [Diaspora Alliance antisemitism trainings](#)