

The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism in 2024: creeping closer, punishing protest

In recent years, a number of countries and institutions have adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA Working Definition). This definition conflates anti-Zionist protest speech with antisemitism.

Antisemitism is the hatred of Jews or the Jewish religion. Zionism is a project of ethnic nationalism, not religion. It does not merit the status of a protected religious belief and it conflicts with basic statements of equal human rights.

Although the IHRA Working Definition has no official standing in Aotearoa, this brief by Alternative Jewish Voices summarises its recent local use. It cites international research and local evidence of its harmful effects.

One of its drafters has testified to US Congress that the IHRA Working Definition is being used with “[the subtlety of a mallet](#)” to stigmatise and stifle criticism of Israel.’ In this country, it is deterring and punishing Palestinians and others who protest Israel’s actions. It is misdirecting concern away from the very real antisemitism around us. Aotearoa’s observer status in the IHRA organisation makes it more likely that its namesake definition will be formally adopted without any opportunity to contest its use through democratic processes.

We call on our government and civil society to publicly oppose any adoption, use or endorsement of the IHRA Working Definition in Aotearoa or in the United Nations.

This brief aims to assist readers to distinguish between real and politicised antisemitism, and to inform anyone who might experience unearned accusations of antisemitism. For enquiries, please contact Marilyn Garson at contact@ajv.org.nz

Alternative Jewish Voices and Dayenu,

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Introduction

In February 2019, Alternative Jewish Voices co-founders Fred Albert and Marilyn Garson published a NZ Herald OpEd titled *Are We The New Antisemites?*

When Zionism is blurred into Judaism, a political project is elevated into the status of a protected religious belief. A policy is shielded from political or legal scrutiny.

Now Israel stands charged with genocide. More than ever, Alternative Jewish Voices wishes to distinguish Israel from the Jewish religion that we want our neighbours and our government to respect and protect. We do not need new definitions of antisemitism; we need a renewed community commitment to reject racism in all of its forms.

The IHRA Working Definition is the chief instrument which, when adopted as policy to regulate antisemitism, protects the ideology of Zionism as if it were synonymous with the religion of Judaism, and calls opposition to Zionism antisemitic.

When anti-Zionist or pro-human rights speech are reported as antisemitic incidents, antisemitism appears to skyrocket. With its 2022 survey of antisemitism, the NZ Jewish Council brought that phenomenon to Aotearoa. It labelled 63% of New Zealanders as antisemitic, many of them for agreeing with statements which are consistent with UN-recognised human rights and the findings of the world's major human rights organisations.

The IHRA Working Definition has shown itself to be a harmful, political distraction from the very real issue of antisemitism in country after country. It has no official standing in Aotearoa. Nevertheless, Zionist organisations use the IHRA Working Definition to charge Palestinians, non-Zionist Jews and other public speakers of antisemitism. Several years of this practice have succeeded in confusing everyone and misdirecting public attention from the very real growth of genuine antisemitism.

In 2023, Justice for Palestine and Alternative Jewish Voices jointly surveyed the consequences of participating in rights-based Palestinian advocacy in Aotearoa; the first systematic attempt to quantify the substantial harms driven by the IHRA Working Definition and its broader influence on how antisemitism is defined. Since October 7, 2023 the IHRA Working Definition has further fuelled uncounted accusations against people who have stood up to speak for the rights – indeed, the survival – of Gazan Palestinians.

New Zealand has observer status at the IHRA organisation, which increases the possibility that its namesake IHRA Working Definition will be adopted by this government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) rather than being contested by any democratic process.

What's so bad about the IHRA Working Definition of antisemitism?

To understand the IHRA Working Definition, it is necessary to distinguish between the issue of antisemitism, the political project of the definition, and the method of its introduction. Each of those has distinct implications.

The IHRA Working Definition claims to address antisemitism, but it does not reflect or respond to the classic anti-Jewish hatred that New Zealanders primarily encounter from White supremacist / far Right actors. That hatred has been energetically mainstreamed since October 7, and the IHRA Working Definition is the wrong tool to respond.

Because it focuses on protest against Israel's occupation, the IHRA Working Definition inevitably reports a massive increase in 'anti-Zionist antisemitism' among protestors. This finding attempts to spark a moral panic about anti-Zionism while leaving real antisemitism untouched.

Rather than regarding a national rejection of racism as a shared social obligation, the IHRA Working Definition tries to sever antisemitism from all other forms of racism. It responds to antisemitism alone, via a separate and heavily pro-Israel framing.

In practice the Israel-centred IHRA Working Definition has chiefly been used to stigmatise speech critical of Israel or to further the Zionist claim to monopolise Jewish identity. This political project targets Palestinians and their allies, non- or anti-Zionist Jews, and human rights supporters.

The strategy of the IHRA Working Definition seeks to prevent criticism of Israel by capturing the machinery of regulation. It removes antisemitism from the domestic public policy arena, instead importing a non-negotiable international standard to govern the regulation of antisemitism. This strategy can be replicated by anyone with enough influence and access. The strategy of the IHRA Working Definition therefore has implications for national protection of political, protest and dissenting speech at the domestic level. It also belongs on the agenda of those who advocate for an independent, progressive foreign policy.

The IHRA's "new antisemitism" politicises matters of belief

The IHRA Working Definition has politicised deeply-felt, real issues. We will only name the issues here, because they are not matters of public policy. They belong in the sphere of personal and communal belief.

Although antisemitism is very old, scholars and believers have never agreed on its nature. Is antisemitism cyclical, eternal or exceptional? Some Jews believe that antisemitism is eternal and unchanging. They conclude that Israel was destined to inherit the world's antisemitism, no matter what Israel's leaders did. This belief does not engage with the substance of protest against Israel's actions. Such protest is dismissed as a 'new antisemitism' (We will keep the scare quotes because we regard this as a scare tactic.).

When it calls anti-Zionism antisemitic, the IHRA Working Definition seeks to win by regulation an increasingly bitter identity contest within the Jewish community. Zionism – the nationalist project of a majority-Jewish state – intended to end, not to complement, Jewish life in the Diaspora. That project manifestly failed as a majority of Jews have declined to move to Israel, but now proponents of Israel trumpet Zionism as being the only acceptable mode of Jewish identity. This monopolising of identity has furiously divided Jewish communities around the world. Zionism reduces

pluralist Judaism to Jews' loyalty to an illiberal territorial administration. That is a racist reduction redolent of antisemitic tropes.

Those who subsume Jewish identity into Israel further claim that any challenge to Israel conceals anti-Jewish hatred, threatening Jews and Jewish life here in Aotearoa. In that vein, the New Zealand Jewish Council (NZJC) sends disempowering messages to the community that [disagreement on the question of Israel is racist and threatening](#). In the Council's view, this disagreement makes Jews the most endangered group in Aotearoa.

To be clear, the Jewish community is threatened by the growth of real racism, which we must combat alongside our antiracist allies. Jews are not threatened by speech which upholds Palestinians' equal humanity and rights. Presenting that protest as a 'new antisemitic' threat is dishonest. It misdirects concern and resources, and cuts the Jewish community off from empowering solidarities.

The IHRA Working Definition's 'new antisemitism' shifts the focus from historic Christian and European antisemitism to the Middle East. The standard-bearers of this threat are Muslims, Arabs and Palestinians in particular. In this worldview, Palestinian resistance to Israel's occupation is driven by implacable racial hostility while Israel's violence is self-defence. The IHRA Working Definition imagines Jews and Muslims in eternal opposition and calls the prospect of solutions naive. This worldview finds a home in the Islamophobic West. It helps to explain states' exceptional indulgence of Israel's occupation and its leaders' statements of genocidal intent since October 7.

The IHRA Working Definition has enabled these pre-existing beliefs to coalesce around international regulation of antisemitism by providing a single, rigidly defined response.

The IHRA Working Definition fails as a definition

The IHRA Working Definition does not define antisemitism, does not draw on our experience of it and does not enable the work of combating it.

The Oxford dictionaries say that a definition is a statement of exact meaning: antisemitism is a hatred of Jews or Judaism. The IHRA Working Definition opens with a sentence too vague and plastic to be the basis of decisions: "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews." Far from being a definition, this is a conditional in search of some content.

The IHRA Working Definition appends eleven examples of speech, seven of which focus on Israel rather than Jews or Judaism. [Not one of these examples was adopted by the IHRA](#)'s own decision-making body – not one – yet the proponents of the IHRA Working Definition insist that they must be adopted in their entirety into IHRA Working Definition governance.

One can oppose the IHRA Working Definition simply by saying that protesting the conduct of Israel's occupation or upholding Palestinians' human rights does not make one an antisemite. Beyond that essential opposition, the IHRA Working Definition rests on errant foundations.

- Zionism is Judaism, and Israel is the ultimate expression of Jewishness.

Zionism is Jewish nationalism and it has become an article of faith for some Jews, but Judaism has been a plural noun and a diverse religious / ethnic identity for two thousand years. The [Harvard Law Review](#) wrote:

A primary tool of Israeli advocacy organizations has long been public vilification of Palestinian rights supporters as anti-Semitic, a charge that carries a powerful chilling effect... [T]here are certainly respectable reasons for disfavoring complicity in Israel's human rights record. Moreover, the status of being Jewish is not 'inextricably tied' to such conduct or complicity – and to suggest otherwise would in fact ring anti-Semitic. Zionism does not reflect the views of all Jewish people.

- Antisemitism is unique and eternal, and requires a response that is separate from other forms of racism.

Every hatred has a history of suffering. Antisemitism is an ancient hate; however, the belief in an eternal, fixed antisemitism provides an inadequate reading of history. A fixed view of antisemitism impedes the recognition that Jews have also [always been actors](#). By reducing Jews to fated victimhood, the IHRA Working Definition impedes the genuine, responsible Jewish antiracism that brings us into solidarity with others.

Concern has been expressed overseas that the IHRA Working Definition's distinct regime also creates the [policy tick box of the moment](#), drawing resources away from other antiracism programmes.

- Despite its claims that antisemitism is eternal, the IHRA Working Definition's focus on Israel enables accusations that have no basis in historic antisemitic beliefs. It targets other attitudes entirely and in doing so promotes inequality

[The IHRA Working Definition calls antisemitic] positions that are factually correct and politically egalitarian. Since its birth Israel has systematically discriminated against its [Palestinian population](#). Today Israel denies equality to Palestinians both within and beyond the country's legal borders. It is not difficult to see why Israel might be labelled 'a racist endeavour'. ... We don't have to take a view on the merits and demerits of their proposals to see that they should not be tarred as antisemitic. Yet this is what the IHRA working definition does. This is just one point (and there are others) where the IHRA working definition contorts the customary meaning of antisemitism. Far from supporting equal rights, it promotes the cause of inequality.

[Council for the Defense of British Universities](#)

- Antisemitism is on the rise.

Yes, it is! However, because the IHRA Working Definition considers so much protest to be antisemitic, it produces inflated reporting which creates a moral panic about anti-Zionism and distracts concern from the real sources of racist danger. From within the Jewish community, we attest that misdirection has become a consistent feature of community messages that tell us disagreement is antisemitic and those who protest for Palestinian rights are the chief source of threat.

- Israel has inherited the antisemitism previously expressed toward Jewish people. This view is often encapsulated by saying, 'The state of the Jews has become the Jew of the states.' It is a form of concealed antisemitism to

challenge Israel's regime or the Jews as a national group requiring majoritarian power in a state.

Proponents of the IHRA Working Definition transfer the human rights of Jews to national rights of Israel while denying Palestinians' human and collective political rights. Both the extension and the denial are wrong. States do not have human rights. Humans do. Yugoslavia had no inherent right to exist in its erstwhile form. Rather, the people living in that territory had individual and collective rights.

States – or more accurately their regimes of government – must earn their legitimacy. Legitimacy derives from the consent of all those who are governed, and from the fulfilment of international obligations. No state has a right to imagine, legislate and enforce a way of life that is predicated upon permanently excluding categories of its citizens. Israel's government de-legitimises itself by these actions and attracts legitimate criticism.

One need not hold a particular view of Jewish peoplehood to refute this claim. The great majority of anti-Israel protest observes that no people, in no state, have a right to do what Israel is doing: occupation, dispossession, violent oppression, blockade, apartheid – and now genocidal violence and starvation. None of those objections is based upon the religious identity of the occupier or the occupied.

States also have obligations, some of which are codified into international law and conventions. Israel [flaunts its obligations](#). The actions of successive Israeli governments create compelling reasons for people and other states to protest. Opposing Israel's actions is not inherently antisemitic.

- Israel is the object of disproportionate, antisemitic censure by the United Nations and human rights advocates.

Israel is conducting the longest and most flagrantly illegal occupation in modern history. It has been repeatedly found to govern through a regime of apartheid, which is a crime against humanity. It stands charged with genocide. That attracts censure and protest.

We see a different exceptionalism: no other state has been the subject of so much censure and *so little action* by other states to uphold the law of states and the human rights of Palestinians.

- Israel-related protest has become a Left-approved outlet to express antisemitism.

There is some truth in this, just as it is true that Zionists stand too close to Hindutva and the White Zionism that celebrates Israel's ethnic power.

The IHRA Working Definition is precisely the wrong tool to respond to this real problem. The IHRA Working Definition casts its net absurdly wide. When 63% of New Zealanders are called antisemitic, real antisemites can happily hide in the crowd and protest that they are merely anti-Zionist.

- Anti-Zionism is antisemitism – end of conversation.

The IHRA Working Definition turns discussion of Palestine into a discussion of antisemitism. The IHRA Working Definition silences Palestinian voices.

The IHRA Working Definition calls expressions of Palestinian identity, rights and aspirations antisemitic because they correctly challenge their occupier's claims to exclusive rights (such as the rights reserved for Jews in Israel's 2018 Nation State Law or its Law of Return). The IHRA Working Definition stigmatises expressions of Palestinians' most basic equality.

Method of the IHRA Working Definition

We were alarmed when, without public notice and without any mention of the roles of the Commissioners of Human Rights and Race Relations, New Zealand joined the IHRA as an observer. We have repeatedly objected that the effect of housing the IHRA Working Definition within a Holocaust remembrance organisation is to [politicise the Holocaust](#), and that has happened. Now that New Zealand is associated with this highly politicised organisation, New Zealand will surely come under increased pressure to adopt its namesake definition through MFAT officials, eliding national discussion of racism.

Who is bypassing the public stake in this issue – who are the proponents of the IHRA Working Definition? Several of the pro-IHRA Working Definition [entities which appear to be Jewish](#) are instead primarily Christian or secular in their overlapping directorships; and inextricable from the Free Speech Union, Taxpayers' Union, and Property Investors' Association. In this country, Zionism is an [item on the neoliberal agenda of domestic politics](#).

For further reading, the Foundation for Middle East Peace maintains an extensive, current [database of significant articles and critiques](#) of the IHRA Working Definition.

How it works: the IHRA definition in practice

The NZJC relied on the IHRA Working Definition for its 2022 survey of antisemitism in New Zealand. The survey questions primarily focused on attitudes to Israel and Zionism. The NZJC funding application to the Ministry of Ethnic Communities claimed, 'This is a project with widespread Jewish community support, across multiple organisations.' We filed an Official Information Act (OIA) request to challenge that claim as well as their finding that 63% of New Zealanders hold antisemitic attitudes. See [our full statement here](#).

The OIA response document file includes supporting statements from related organisations. Most of the survey's supporters shared Zionism, Evangelical [Christianity](#) and very conservative politics. If the Ministry of Ethnic Communities believed that the Jewish community broadly requested a survey centred on attitudes about Israel, it was mistaken or misled. The NZJC is itself [unelected and unrepresentative](#). The Wellington Jewish Council acknowledged in 2021 that it [lacks a mandate](#) to speak for the community and it has ceased to formally operate.

Notwithstanding this, the Ministry of Ethnic Communities recommended a \$15,000 grant for the NZJC, adding, 'We have good connection with this group.'

Discerning the impact of the IHRA Working Definition

The NZJC's funding application cites the methodology of a 2017 report, [Antisemitism in Contemporary Great Britain: A study of attitudes towards Jews and Israel](#).

That survey asked a number of paired questions about Jews and Israel to help discern whether 'Israel' had become a proxy for 'Jews'. That careful method found 30% of the population 'who believe a small number of negative ideas about Jews, but who may not be consciously hostile or prejudiced towards them.'

The NZJC's method found that '63% of New Zealanders surveyed agree with at least one antisemitic view' – twice as many! According to the NZJC funding submission, a 2014 survey of antisemitism in New Zealand had found that 14% of New Zealanders held antisemitic views. Can antisemitism have increased 450% in eight years, to a level more than double its prevalence in the UK?

In 2019, Canadians were told a similarly jarring story. Both the Canadian B'nai Brith and the American Anti-Defamation League conducted audits of antisemitic incidents in 2019. The American audit applied more limited criteria to the relationship between attitudes toward Israel and Jews. Their method was 'careful not to conflate general criticism of Israel or anti-Israel activism with antisemitism.'

The Canadian B'nai Brith used the IHRA and claimed 'that an [equal number of antisemitic incidents](#) has taken place in Canada [and the US] despite the fact that the US has a population 9 times that of Canada and has 17 times as many Jews.'

	Population in 2019	Jewish Population in 2019	Antisemitic Incidents
Canada	37,590,000	392,000	2207
United States	328,300,000	6,970,000	2107

The use of the IHRA Working Definition foreseeably, greatly inflates the findings of antisemitism because it confuses Israel with Jewishness. Conversely, no empirical evidence has yet been presented that the use of the IHRA Working Definition has ever succeeded in reducing antisemitism.

The NZJC's funding application calls its survey 'especially [important] as the Jewish Community Security Group (CSG) has recorded a record number of incidents in 2020.' Unsurprisingly, the [CSG uses precisely this ideological definition](#) to count incidents of antisemitism, which it then shares with the NZ Police, security agencies and the Embassy of Israel.

Alternative Jewish Voices has been calling on the Community Security Group to act with transparency since 2020. We do not know how many among the Palestinian, non-Zionist Jewish, human rights and antiracism communities have wrongly been labelled as Jew-haters.

Finding the 'new antisemitism'

The NZJC categorised responses in the most absolute and normative way possible. They define every disagreement with their stance as antisemitic. The survey has no category called 'disagree,' only a category called 'antisemitic.'

Of the survey's 18 attitudes, fully half are attitudes about Israel rather than Jews. Therefore, this survey sought out objectors to Israel's occupation of Palestine and called them racist.

If, for example, a respondent agreed with the conclusion of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Harvard Law School and others that Israel's regime constitutes apartheid, that respondent was classed as hating Jews. If a person understood that Palestinians are indigenous to Palestine, they were antisemitic. If they did not consider Israel democratic because they observed that the government of Israel wields power over millions of West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians who cannot vote in Israeli elections, they were antisemitic.

Such statements are not hateful attitudes toward Jews. They display respect for democracy, international law and human rights; and they are consistent with statements by the world's leading human rights organisations. By conflating these beliefs with the hatred of Jews, the IHRA Working Definition weaponises antisemitism in a way that is beyond dishonest. It is dangerous. By setting its terms in this way, the NZJC placed Jewishness in direct opposition to some of our bedrock values.

This IHRA Working Definition-based exercise demonstrates that a Palestinian who simply asserts her identity and her full human and political rights will repeatedly be called antisemitic – as Palestinians too often are. The NZJC published a document that renders Palestinian identity racist.

To take the survey at face value would encourage a moral panic over anti-Zionism rather than racism, of which antisemitism is one long-standing form. We and many others do oppose Zionism for reasons that have nothing to do with race; rather because we stand against racism and for human equality.

How does the IHRA Working Definition manifest today?

Since October 7, the Jewish community has been repeatedly warned by the NZJC of a sharp rise in the 'new antisemitism' of protest. We have scanned the NZJC's newsletters and we do not see any reference to the disturbing antisemitic threat emanating from far Right disinformation networks. The Disinformation Project cites these networks as growing sources of threat, vigorously [seeking to normalise and mainstream racism](#). The NZJC is stoking an IHRA Working Definition-enabled moral panic about anti-Zionism instead.

Beyond the Jewish community, the stealthy advance of the IHRA Working Definition is most evident in the dreary regularity with which rights-based protest for Gazan Palestinians is met with accusations of antisemitism. The frequency of these insults does not detract from the hurt, public embarrassment and private consequences of

being labelled an antisemite. These false and unanswerable accusations aim to deter public participation in democratic processes.

These accusations constitute a real and growing category of social and religious harm. In January 2023, Justice for Palestine and Alternative Jewish Voices jointly surveyed New Zealanders who use rights-based speech for Palestine, in order to elicit their experience of being falsely accused. The responses signal a need for more systematic study of the IHRA Working Definition's use to silence Palestinian speech, harm human rights advocates and denigrate non-Zionist Jewish identity in Aotearoa. See the [full survey results here](#).

- Although antisemitism is a hatred of Jews or Judaism, only 2 respondents were accused of antisemitism for comments relating to Jews or Judaism.
- 93% of respondents were accused for commenting on the actions of the Israeli state, politicians, police or military forces. 66% were accused for commenting on the history of Palestine, and 62% for commenting on Palestinians' equal entitlements to UN-recognised rights.
- 86% of respondents had witnessed accusations addressed to others in public, private or religious (synagogue) venues.
- 67% were personally accused of antisemitism, including 71% of respondents who identified themselves as Jewish or Palestinian.
- 31% of respondents reported being or feeling threatened.
- Seriously harmful personal outcomes were most likely to be reported by Jews or people of Arabic descent.

The IHRA Working Definition implies that assertions of Palestinian identity or rights are inherently anti-Jewish. This compounds our history of securitising the identities of New Zealanders who are Muslim or who we assume to be Muslim. This impact is not new. The Human Rights Commission (HRC) addressed it in its paper, [A Human Rights Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Aotearoa](#).

The HRC paper affirms that all New Zealanders have a right to speech which, while it may be unpopular or even offensive to some, is spoken to uphold our universal human rights. The IHRA Working Definition overturns this vital freedom. We repeat, speech which upholds the rights of Palestinians is not antisemitic. Speech which essentialises or denigrates Jews or Judaism is antisemitic.

The New Zealand Human Rights and Race Relations Commissions are the hosts, and human rights are the framework within which we can and must address antisemitism, Islamophobia and all forms of racism; while we continue to speak and act to uphold the rights of Palestinians to their land and their freedom.

In conclusion, none of us has the right to define our identity so expansively as to demand the erasure of another. Human rights and the IHRA Working Definition are not two equally valid, opposing views. Human rights is our global, codified, committed standard and the IHRA Working Definition violates it. Antisemitism is real and the IHRA Working Definition does not address its reality. It is instead a tool to punish support for the equal human and political rights of Palestinians, and it is a mechanism to Zionise and monopolise Jewish identity.

Further reading

Jewish Voice For Peace on antisemitism: <http://onantisemitism.com/>

Antony Lerman, [Whatever Happened to Antisemitism?](#)

Kenneth Stern (chief drafter of the IHRAWWD), 2020 [The Conflict Over the Conflict](#)

[Forum for Middle East Peace database](#) of articles and analyses of the IHRAWWD

[Joint statement of human rights organisations](#)

Jamie Stern Weiner, Oxford University PhD candidate, [How the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism is Being Misrepresented](#). Summarised, [IHRA 'Misrepresents' Own Definition](#).

[Brian Klug](#), senior research fellow and a member of the philosophy faculty at Oxford University, on the necessity of protecting unpopular speech from the IHRAWWD

[Short video](#) from Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) in Canada

The '[witch hunt... against critics of Israel](#).' Ha'aretz

The Guardian - [UN urged to reject antisemitism definition](#) over 'misuse' to shield Israel, April 2023

ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) - [Reject Definitions of Antisemitism](#) that Encompass Protected Speech February 2024

The Nation – How a leading definition of antisemitism has been [weaponized against Israel's critics](#) December 2023

The New Yorker – [The problem with defining antisemitism](#) March 2024