

FAQs on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism

What is the IHRA?

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance was founded in 1998 and is an [intergovernmental](#) organization, comprised mainly of European member states, that promotes Holocaust education and memorialization policies. Countries pay EUR 30,000 per year for full membership, and member states are generally represented in IHRA plenaries and other sessions by diplomats. Presidency of the IHRA rotates yearly between countries; the presidency is currently held by Croatia.

How did the IHRA come to adopt the Working Definition of Antisemitism?

The IHRA adopted the Working Definition of Antisemitism in 2016. The definition had originated with the EU Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in the mid-aughts; however, in part due to controversy over the definition's examples of antisemitism – most of them related to Israel – the EUMC never formally adopted the WDA. In 2014, Mark Weitzman of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (and a member of the IHRA's U.S. delegation) began campaigning for the IHRA to adopt it instead.

There was a further concerted push for the WDA to be revived and codified at the international level in 2015 at the [5th Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism](#) (GFCA) in Jerusalem, a joint initiative of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Diaspora Affairs. The IHRA was represented at that conference by Ambassador [Szabolcs Takács](#) of Hungary's far-right [ruling Fidesz party](#) who was serving as IHRA chair at the time, and Weitzman.

As per the [summary notes](#) from the GFCA, the Forum's legislative working group advised that the WDA "should be reintroduced into the international arena with the aim of giving it legal status" (p. 17). The Forum's working group on international organizations also recommended "[f]oster[ing] efforts to increase the use of the EUMC working definition of antisemitism" (p. 24). The GFCA's "Final Statement on Combating Antisemitism in Europe" stressed that "the formal definition of antisemitism should include unambiguous reference to attacks on the legitimacy of the State of Israel and its right to exist."

Since the IHRA adopted the WDA, there has been an intensive campaign by the Israeli government and its supporters for the definition to be enshrined in law. The Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs, for example, has [heavily promoted](#) the IHRA definition in its [reports](#) and has pushed for it to be used as the [basis](#) for attacking the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS)

movement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has [personally urged](#) countries around the world to adopt the IHRA definition.

Is there a consensus on the IHRA?

Although numerous supporters of the IHRA definition promote it as being subject to a broad consensus — [touting](#), for example, its adoption and endorsement by more than 1,100 “global entities”; and [referring](#) to it as an “international standard” — there has been pronounced and broad [pushback](#) by scholars, politicians, activists, and others, who caution that it poses a threat to free speech and to academic freedom. Moreover, the data suggesting an overwhelming embrace of the WDA mixes together symbolic adoption (e.g. by proclamation or other non-binding gestures) and legal adoption and enforcement, creating a misleading impression of the extent to which it is actually being acted on in order to challenge antisemitism.

By the same token, the wide variance in the “entities” that have in some way engaged with the WDA — a blend of federal, state, and local governments, sports clubs, universities, businesses, etc — means that the statistics on adoption reveal little about the WDA’s actual impact in any given arena. [For example](#), 80 percent of countries have not adopted or endorsed the IHRA definition; less than 1 percent of “non-federal government entities” have adopted the definition; and the total of 274 “NGOs, corporations, religious organizations, student clubs, political parties, and other groups” that have endorsed the definition represent a “[statistically insignificant](#)” number of such outfits worldwide.

How significant is the opposition to the IHRA?

The original definition’s lead author, Kenneth Stern, is on the record opposing the codification of the IHRA definition, stating it was intended to be used solely to classifying hate crimes in Europe. Hundreds of [scholars](#), including [many](#) of Jewish and Israeli origin, have signed on to petitions and statements criticizing the IHRA definition and warning of its negative impact on academic freedom and freedom of speech. Palestinian academics and groups have also [warned](#) of the definition’s negative impact on Palestine advocates and their work.

Numerous leading civil and human rights organizations, among them the American Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Watch, the National Lawyers Guild, and the Center for Constitutional Rights have similarly come out against the definition. Prominent American-Jewish groups, including J Street, the New Israel Fund, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, Jewish Voice for Peace, IfNotNow, Bend the Arc, Peace Now US, and T’ruah Rabbis also oppose the definition.

Don't the American-Jewish institutions that have endorsed the definition – the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, Jewish Community Relations Councils, etc – represent a majority of the community?

Although legacy American-Jewish organizations have historically acted as the “voice” of the American-Jewish community, there has always been a greater plurality of opinion among their constituents than these institutions often imply. Moreover, especially as it relates to Israel-Palestine – which is the source of the controversy over the IHRA definition – an ever-greater number of American Jews are breaking from a tradition of unquestioned support for the Israeli government, and thereby breaking away from the communal leadership. The stances of American-Jewish establishment leaders – whose organizations are often funded by right-wing mega donors who are highly conservative on Israel-Palestine – should not be understood to represent a consensus among the American-Jewish community.

Isn't a definition of antisemitism necessary in order to be able to work against it?

Antisemitism is a complex social and political phenomenon, and educating groups and individuals on its history and varying manifestations is a critical tool with which to fight it. However, having a singular definition for antisemitism when no such singular definition exists for any other form of oppression further isolates antisemitism from other forms of oppression, and Jews from other oppressed groups. This excludes Jews from the broader vision of equity, belonging, and justice for all that many governments and organizations of all kinds have committed to working toward.

Moreover, codifying the IHRA definition in contexts where existing laws already protect Jews against antisemitism is not only unnecessary, but threatens to both undermine the existing, inclusive set of protections, and to fuel antisemitic ideas among other targeted groups about Jews receiving special treatment from governments.

What are some alternatives to the IHRA definition?

The [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#), a response to the IHRA definition, was workshopped over the course of a year by a diverse group of scholars of antisemitism and related fields. Published in 2021, around 350 academics have signed on to date, endorsing a definition that offers additional guidelines for identifying antisemitism. The definition also attempts to make clear when speech on Israel-Palestine should *not* be considered antisemitic.

The [Nexus Task Force Guide to Identifying Antisemitism](#) specifically addresses “the nexus of issues related to antisemitism and Israel,” and was created by a core group of scholars and

other experts. It sets out different examples of when speech on Israel crosses the line into antisemitism, as well as that which should not be considered antisemitic.

Although the JDA and Nexus documents attempt to define antisemitism, they are presented as guidelines and educational tools, and – unlike the IHRA definition – are not intended to be codified into law and policy.