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The IHRA definition of antisemitism is a non-legally binding working definition, developed as a tool for monitoring anti-Semitic incidents worldwide. Its stated purpose is to increase “Holocaust education, remembrance and research”. It was never intended to serve as a legal framework for institutions or governments. Most dangerously, it conflates criticism of the state of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism.

7 of the 11 “contemporary examples of antisemitism” in the IHRA definition involve criticism of the state of Israel, and not the Jewish people. The definition was established as a guideline, not an enforceable law. Defining antisemitism so broadly and vaguely will have chilling effects on free speech, scholarship and public dialogue around international affairs and current events.

In a letter from April 2023, 60 humanitarian and civil rights organisations including Human Rights Watch (HRW), American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Israeli rights group B’Tselem, and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), appealed to the UN to not use the IHRA definition in its action plan against antisemitism and subsequent activities.

Adoption of this definition by governments and institutions has been framed as a way to combat antisemitism. In practice, however, the IHRA definition has often been used to wrongly label criticism of Israel - a state - as antisemitic. Contrary to combating genuine antisemitism, it has the effect of suppressing, non-violent protest, activism and speech that's critical of Israel and/or Zionism. The definition has historically been used to target professors, students, grassroots organisations, human rights groups, and even members of the US Congress, who either document or criticize Israeli policies or human rights violations.

Many leading antisemitism experts, and scholars of Jewish studies and the Holocaust, as well as free speech and anti-racism experts, challenge the definition, arguing that it restricts legitimate criticism of Israel and undermines the fight against antisemitism. Even Ken Stern, the main drafter of the IHRA definition, recently reiterated his concerns about institutions adopting the IHRA definition stating concerns that it's “a blunt instrument to label anyone an antisemite.”