

# THE POLITICS OF A DEFINITION

How the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism  
Is Being Misrepresented

## Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

It has been claimed that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism, ‘including its 11 examples’, reflects an international consensus of antisemitism experts. This report, based on my doctoral research at the University of Oxford, exposes that claim as untrue:

- 1) There is **no expert consensus** supporting the Working Definition.
- 2) IHRA’s decision-making body, the Plenary, **did not adopt any examples** of ‘antisemitism’ as part of its Working Definition.
- 3) Senior IHRA officials and pro-Israel groups have **misrepresented the IHRA Plenary’s decision** in order to smuggle into the Working Definition examples that can be used to protect Israel from criticism.
- 4) These examples have been used, in practice, to  **censor Israel’s critics**.

### **There is no expert consensus supporting the Working Definition of Antisemitism.**

The Working Definition was principally drafted and negotiated by pro-Israel advocacy groups, not scholars of Jewish history. The initial drafting and negotiation of the Working Definition in 2004-5 was led by the American Jewish Committee (AJC). From early 2014 to May 2016, Mark Weitzman of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) engineered its adoption by IHRA.

Both the AJC and SWC are **interested, partisan organisations**. They engage, inter alia, in blanket pro-Israel advocacy. The AJC promoted Israel’s line on [Operation Cast Lead](#), the [Goldstone Report](#), the [Free Gaza flotilla](#), [Operation Protective Edge](#) and [UN Security Council Resolution 2334](#) reaffirming the illegality of Israel’s settlements. Even where it disapproves of Israeli Government policy, the AJC [pledged](#) in 2020, ‘the AJC will do what it has always done: explain Israel to the wider world ... We will always be their advocates’. The SWC has urged Israel to [‘reject a return’ to its pre-June 1967 “Auschwitz” borders](#)’ and described European Union (EU) guidelines prohibiting the funding of Israeli institutions established unlawfully in Occupied Palestinian Territory as [‘redolent of the 1930’s Nazi boycott of the Jews throughout the Reich ... which was the prelude to the Holocaust’](#).

In the course of this advocacy, both the AJC and SWC have **conflated legitimate criticism of Israel with antisemitism**. The AJC applies the [‘antisemitism’](#) epithet to [‘anti-Zionism’](#) as well as the [campaign for boycotts, divestment and sanctions](#) (BDS) against Israel. For its part, the SWC in 2018 ranked among the world’s most egregious [‘anti-semitic incidents’](#) a decision by Airbnb to delist Israeli rental properties located in Occupied Palestinian Territory and a German bank’s refusal to cut-off a Jewish

peace group. Its 2016 review branded UNSC Resolution 2334 the world's '[Worst Anti-Semitic/Anti-Israel Incident](#)'. And when the Pre-Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Court ruled that it had territorial jurisdiction in Palestine, in February 2021, the SWC charged this 'kangaroo court' with '[anti-Semitism](#)'.

While the AJC and SWC were the principal drafters and promoters of the Working Definition, they were not objective experts on antisemitism. Meanwhile, [academic](#) as well as legal [experts broadly agree](#) that the IHRA Working Definition is [imprecise, partial and open to political abuse](#).

### **There is no IHRA consensus for including any examples in the Working Definition of Antisemitism.**

In May 2016, IHRA's general Plenary in Bucharest [adopted](#) by consensus a document comprising two distinct parts: a two-sentence **working definition of antisemitism** and a list of **11 examples of potentially antisemitic statements and behaviours**.

This document, in its entirety, has been **inaccurately** referred to as the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism.

International, national and civil society bodies have been urged to adopt this so-called IHRA Working Definition on the basis that it reflects a hard-won consensus among IHRA's Member Countries:

[The significance of this definition](#) lies in the international cooperation that led to it ... [I]t was unanimously approved by government representatives from all IHRA Member Countries. Gaining this level of international consensus was no easy feat ... Any 'modified' version of the IHRA definition that does not include all of its 11 examples is no longer the IHRA definition. (*Seven UK delegates to IHRA, August 2018*)

But in reality, **there was no consensus within IHRA** for including the examples in its Working Definition. On the contrary, IHRA's decision-making body **excluded all the examples from the Working Definition** it adopted.

The SWC had presented IHRA with a draft text that did not clearly distinguish between the two-sentence definition and the 11 examples. But after a number of IHRA Member Countries objected to the examples, a revised text was adopted in which **the examples had been separated** from the Working Definition.

An Ambassador who participated in these negotiations testified that IHRA consensus was achieved only when

the original draft text was cut into two, and only the first two-sentence part was to be the working-definition to be adopted, while the other part, the examples, remained what they were: examples to serve as illustrations, to guide the IHRA in its work.

A second delegation head who attended the May 2016 Plenary corroborated this account. Two other members of delegations from different countries also confirmed their understanding that the IHRA Working Definition comprised **only a two-sentence passage without any examples**.

IHRA's [press release](#) about the adoption **clearly distinguished the Working Definition from the illustrative examples** by printing the two-sentence definition in a distinct typeface and demarcating it in a box. Germany followed this same distinction in September 2017, when it [adopted](#) an 'extended version' of the IHRA definition that incorporated **none** of the examples. IHRA [publicly recognised](#) this as an adoption of its Working Definition.

**Pro-Israel groups do not value the Working Definition but prize the examples that protect Israel from legitimate criticism.**

The IHRA Working Definition reads in full:

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

Pro-Israel activists attach little value to this definition, which they consider '[neutered \[and\] ... unmoored from any current reality](#)' (SWC).

What pro-Israel activists deem 'essential' is '[the list of examples](#)' (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs), which the AJC goes so far as to designate the *real* definition: '[essentially the definition is the examples](#)'.

This is because **fully seven of the 11 examples relate to Israel**. They include criteria which can be used to stigmatise and stifle legitimate criticism of Israel, such as calling Israel a 'racist endeavour' or '[a]pplying double standards' to it.

Such instrumentalization is not a theoretical prospect. The examples have been used, in practice, to delegitimise everything from reports by leading [human rights organisations](#) (including [Israeli human rights organisations](#)) to [the EU's decision](#) to accurately label imports from Israel's illegal settlements.

**Supporters of the examples have misrepresented their status.**

Supporters of the examples have **misrepresented their status** in respect of IHRA's definition. IHRA Member Countries were able to reach consensus only by *excluding* the examples from the Working Definition. The examples' supporters have **falsely claimed** that there was a consensus for *including* them.

In May 2018, IHRA's Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial unilaterally proclaimed that 'the definition and the examples constituted the full definition, and that the subject was **not open to further discussion**'. This was prompted by Mark Weitzman, its former Chair and the SWC's Director of Government Affairs.

But the Antisemitism Committee had, and has, **no authority** to rewrite or override a decision of the IHRA Plenary, while the IHRA Plenary has neither revisited nor revised its 2016 decision.

The SWC must know that IHRA's Plenary decided, after heated debate, to exclude the examples from its definition. But the SWC still **falsely asserts** that the '[IHRA Working Definition ... consists of a clear definition of antisemitism along with specific examples](#)'.

Even as IHRA's core mandate is to preserve historical truth, IHRA's own Permanent Office has participated in this **misinformation campaign**. The IHRA website [incorrectly states](#) that the 'Working Definition, including its examples, was reviewed and decided upon unanimously during IHRA's Bucharest Plenary in May 2016'. In June 2020, IHRA's Chair [stated](#):

When IHRA member countries agreed to the text of the working definition, they adopted it in its entirety — the text inside the box, *and* the examples included. So that means, each Member Country stands behind the text of the working definition in its entirety — the text inside the box, *and* the examples included.

This **inaccurate claim** was repeated in a [Handbook](#) co-published in January 2021 by IHRA and the European Commission.

These assertions are **refuted by the documentary record**. In fact, IHRA's Plenary excluded the examples from the Working Definition while multiple IHRA Member Countries have since reiterated and reaffirmed this distinction.

It cannot plausibly be suggested that the misrepresentations sampled here were wholly accidental. In the course of an extended written exchange, IHRA's Permanent Office was repeatedly asked whether, as its spokespeople and publications have repeatedly alleged, IHRA's May 2016 Plenary endorsed the 11 examples as part of the IHRA Working Definition. **Up to the present day, IHRA has refused to answer this question.**

## **The examples have been used to censor legitimate criticism of Israel.**

The list of 11 examples, misrepresented as the IHRA Working Definition, has repeatedly been used and promoted as a **tool for censorship**.

In the UK, [multiple universities](#) and at least one [local council](#) cancelled events because they might breach one or another example. The definition's '[architect](#)' did not object but, on the contrary, **applauded this censorship** as a possible '[turning point](#) in the struggle to curb the demonisation of the Jewish state at universities'.

In 2018, the British Labour Party was pressured into incorporating all 11 examples into its Code of Conduct. The result? When [Israel's leading human rights organisation](#) published a position paper on Israel's 'apartheid regime', Labour members were [forbidden from discussing it](#) because doing so might infringe an IHRA example.

Going forwards, an international [coalition](#) of Jewish organisations along with Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs is [calling on social media platforms](#) to use the list of examples to regulate content.

Pro-Israel groups are lobbying governments to [condition NGO funding](#) upon adherence to the examples. The European Commission's IHRA Handbook [recommends](#) that the EU and member States introduce such funding conditionality.

These initiatives have falsely depicted the examples as part of the IHRA Working Definition, thereby mobilising IHRA's moral authority behind an **assault on free speech**. In truth, IHRA's decision-making body excluded the examples from the Working Definition.

Each and all of the claims by Israel's advocates to foist the IHRA definition on the international community are demonstrably false.