

On British Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Palestinian Rights

From the 'original sin' of 1917 to the government's more recent adoption of the controversial IHRA antisemitism definition, Britain has always been firmly in Israel's camp

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In December 2016, then British Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative government [formally adopted](#) the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)'s [working definition](#) of antisemitism. It was the first government in the world to do so, marking yet another milestone in the 100-year history of British support for Zionism and callous disregard for Palestinian rights.

The “original sin” was the 1917 [Balfour Declaration](#), which promised to support the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people”, provided that nothing was done to “prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. In 1917, Arabs constituted [90 percent](#) of the population of Palestine; Jews made up less than 10 percent.



The declaration was thus a classic colonial document: it granted the right to national self-determination to a small minority, while denying it to the majority. To add insult to injury, the declaration referred to 90 percent of the country's inhabitants as “non-Jewish communities in Palestine”, relegating them to an inferior status. Although grotesquely imbalanced in favour of Jews, the declaration at least included a promise to protect the civil and religious rights of Palestinians – but even this promise was never kept.

The British mandate for Palestine lasted from 1920 until midnight on 14 May 1948, the date the State of Israel was proclaimed. The first high commissioner for Palestine, [Herbert Samuel](#), was a Jew and an ardent Zionist. Partiality towards Jews was evident from day one;

the cornerstone of the mandate was to deny representative institutions as long as Arabs were the majority in Palestine.

In the end, Britain over-fulfilled its promise to Zionists by helping the “national home” evolve into a Jewish state, while betraying its pledge to Palestinians. Britain’s betrayal gave rise to the Palestinian [Great Revolt](#) of 1936-39. This was a nationalist uprising, demanding Arab independence and an end to the policy of open-ended Jewish immigration and land purchases.

The revolt was suppressed with utter ruthlessness and brutality by the British army and police. Britain resorted to the entire panoply of [colonial measures](#), including martial law, military courts, detention without trial, caning, flogging, torture, extra-judicial killings, collective punishment and aerial bombardment. Nearly 20,000 Palestinians were killed or wounded during the revolt, and villages were reduced to rubble.

In the process of crushing the uprising, Britain broke the backbone of the Palestinian national movement. British actions gravely weakened Palestinians and strengthened Zionists, as the two national movements moved inexorably towards a final showdown. Palestine was not lost in the late 1940s, as is commonly believed; it was lost in the late 1930s, as a result of Britain’s savage smashing of Palestinian resistance and support for Jewish paramilitary forces.

Anti-Arab racism

An undercurrent of anti-Arab racism coloured Britain’s entire handling of the mandate for Palestine. In 1937, future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill [said](#):

“I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right.

“I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly-wise race ... has come in and taken their place.”

A Black Lives Matter protester had a point when, in June 2020, he sprayed graffiti on a Churchill statue in London’s Parliament Square to [add the words](#) “was a racist”. Churchill held Arabs in contempt as racially inferior. His description of Palestinian Arabs as a “dog in a manger” is shocking, but not entirely surprising; racism usually goes hand in hand with colonialism.

As the British mandate for Palestine approached its inglorious end, Britain persisted in its anti-Palestinian stance. When the United Nations voted in November 1947 to [partition](#) mandatory Palestine into two states, Britain adopted an official posture of neutrality. Behind the scenes, however, it worked to abort the birth of a Palestinian state.

Haj Amin al-Husseini, the leader of the Palestinian national movement, fell out with Britain over its pro-Zionist policy in Palestine and [made contact](#) with Adolf Hitler during the Second World War. In British eyes, a Palestinian state was synonymous with a mufti state; accordingly, Britain’s hostility towards Palestinians and Palestinian statehood was a constant factor in its foreign policy from 1947-49.

Wiped off the map

Britain gave a [green light](#) to its client, King Abdullah of Transjordan, to send his British-led little army into Palestine upon expiry of the British mandate, to capture the West Bank – which was intended to be the heartland of the Palestinian state. The winners in the war for Palestine were King Abdullah and the Zionist movement; the losers were Palestinians. Around [750,000 Palestinians](#), more than half the population, became refugees, and the name Palestine was wiped off the map.

In short, Britain played a significant but little-known part in [the Nakba](#), the catastrophe that overwhelmed Palestinians in 1948. When Jordan formally annexed the West Bank in 1950, Britain and Pakistan were the only UN members to [recognise it](#).

Against the backdrop of [Black Lives Matter](#), the reassessment of Britain's colonial past and the drive to decolonise school curricula, some scholars have leapt to the defence of the British Empire. Nigel Biggar, the Regius professor of theology at the University of Oxford, for example, defends the British Empire as a moral force for good.



Christopher Hilton / Statue of Cecil Rhodes, High Street frontage of Oriel College, Oxford / CC BY-SA 2.0

Referencing Cecil Rhodes and the campaign to remove his statue from Oriel College, Biggar [conceded](#) that Rhodes was an imperialist, “but British colonialism was not essentially racist, wasn’t essentially exploitative, and wasn’t essentially atrocious”. The British Empire’s record in Palestine, however, is rather difficult to reconcile with the benign view of the learned professor.

Shameful legacy

The Conservative Party and its leaders are the standard-bearers of this shameful legacy of unqualified British support for Israel and indifference to Palestinian rights. Conservative

Friends of Israel (CFI) is by far the most powerful pro-Israel lobbying group in Britain, and its membership includes around [80 percent](#) of Tory members of parliament. Since the May 2015 general election, CFI has sent 24 delegations with more than 180 Conservatives to [visit Israel](#).

The last three leaders of the Conservative Party have been uncritical supporters of the State of Israel. Former Prime Minister David Cameron [described himself](#) as a “passionate friend” of Israel and insisted that nothing could break that friendship.

Theresa May was probably the most pro-Israeli leader in Europe during her premiership. In an address to CFI in 2016, she [described Israel](#) as a “remarkable country ... a thriving democracy, a beacon of tolerance, an engine of enterprise, and an example to the rest of the world”. She spoke of Israel as “a country where people of all religions and sexualities are free and equal in the eyes of the law”.

May reserved her sharpest criticism for the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) [movement](#), which works to end international support for Israel’s oppression of Palestinians and to pressure Israel to comply with international law. BDS is a non-violent, global grassroots campaign whose principal demands – the right of return of 1948 refugees, an end to occupation, and equal rights for Israel’s Palestinian citizens – are grounded in international law. This movement, [May stated](#), “is wrong, it is unacceptable, and this party and this government will have no truck with those who subscribe to it”.

May reminded her audience that Britain was entering a “special time” – the centenary of the Balfour Declaration – and went on to deliver a wholly one-sided verdict on this colonial document: “It is one of the most important letters in history. It demonstrates Britain’s vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people. And it is an anniversary we will be marking with pride.” There was no mention of Britain’s failure to uphold even the minimal rights of Palestinians.

National rights

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has a slightly more nuanced take on Britain’s record as a colonial power in Palestine. In his 2014 [book on Churchill](#), he [described](#) the Balfour Declaration as “bizarre”, “tragically incoherent” and an “exquisite piece of Foreign Office fudgerama”. This was one of the rare examples of sound judgement and historical insight on Johnson’s part. But in 2015, on a trip to Israel as mayor of London, Johnson [hailed](#) the Balfour Declaration as “a great thing”.

In October 2017, in his capacity as foreign secretary, Johnson [introduced a debate](#) in the House of Commons on the Balfour Declaration. He repeated the mantra about Britain’s pride in the part it played in creating a Jewish state in Palestine. He had the perfect opportunity to balance this with a recognition of Palestine as a state, but he repeatedly turned it down, saying the time was not right. Since the Conservative Party supports a two-state solution, recognising Palestine would be a logical step towards that end.

Arthur Balfour, the foreign secretary in 1917, undertook to uphold the civil and religious rights of the native population of Palestine. A century later, the House of Commons added national rights as well, voting in October 2014 – [by 274 votes to 12](#) – to recognise a Palestinian state. Cameron chose to ignore the non-binding vote; at least he was consistent in his passionate attachment to Israel, which is more than can be said about his successor.

As with Johnson's approach to any subject, in his attitude towards Palestinian rights, expediency prevails.

An unbroken thread of moral myopia, hypocrisy, double standards and skulduggery connects British policy on Palestine, from Balfour to Boris. The Conservative government's adoption in 2016 of the IHRA's non-legally-binding [working definition of antisemitism](#) falls squarely within this tradition of partisanship on behalf of Zionism and Israel, and disdain for Palestinians.

The definition [states](#):

"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."

Problematic examples

The definition does not mention Israel by name, but no fewer than seven out of the 11 ["illustrative examples"](#) that follow concern Israel. They include "denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour"; "applying double standards by requiring of it a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation"; "drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis"; and "holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel".

The 11 examples make a series of unwarranted assumptions about Israel and world Jewry. They assume that all Israelis adhere to the notion of Israel as a Jewish state; that Israel is a "democratic nation"; that Israel is not a racist endeavour; and that all Jews condemn the comparison between Israeli policy and that of the Nazis.

In fact, Israel is a highly heterogeneous and deeply divided society with a wide range of opinions on all these issues - and a political culture marked by fierce disputes and no-holds-barred debates.

Many left-wing Israelis regard Israel as a racist endeavour. B'Tselem, the highly respected Israeli human rights organisation, issued a closely argued [position paper](#) in January titled "A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid."

It [declared](#):

"The entire area Israel controls between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is governed by a single regime working to advance and perpetuate the supremacy of one group over another. By geographically, demographically and physically engineering space, the regime enables Jews to live in a contiguous area with full rights, including self-determination, while Palestinians live in separate units and enjoy fewer rights."

Right-wing Israelis continue to hotly deny that Israel is an apartheid state and reject any comparison with apartheid South Africa. But there is no law against calling Israel an

apartheid state, and progressive Israelis do so all the time. Comparisons with Nazi Germany are also not proscribed by Israeli law. Such comparisons are less common in Israeli political discourse, but they are occasionally expressed in newspaper editorials and even by [politicians](#).

Devil in the details

The global Jewish community is just as diverse and disputatious. Ironically, to treat Jews as a homogeneous group is in fact an antisemitic trope. It is antisemites who fail to differentiate between different kinds of Jews, and want to see them all clustered in one place. It is on this basis that Theodor Herzl, the visionary of the Jewish state, [predicted](#) that “the antisemites will become our most dependable friends”.

The devil is in the details or, in the case of the IHRA document, in the examples. Strictly speaking, there are two definitions: the two opening sentences, quoted above, and the list of 11 examples. This point cannot be emphasised strongly enough; it is a tale of two texts.

To [achieve consensus](#) on the document within the IHRA, it was necessary to [separate](#) the statement from the illustrative examples that followed. Pro-Israel partisans, however, have repeatedly conveyed the false impression that the examples are an integral part of the definition. They also habitually omit the qualifier that this is only a draft – a “working definition”.

As countless [commentators, lawyers and scholars of antisemitism](#) have pointed out, the IHRA working definition is poorly drafted, internally incoherent, hopelessly vague, vulnerable to political abuse, and altogether not fit for purpose. It does not fulfil the most elementary requirement of a definition, which is to define.

The definition [states](#) that “antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews”, but fails to spell out what this perception is. In my 50 years as a university teacher, I have not come across a more vacuous or useless definition. Yet, although it is vacuous, it is not innocuous. Kenneth Stern, the lead author of the definition, has rejected its adoption as a campus hate speech code, [arguing](#) that it “will harm not only pro-Palestinian advocates, but also Jewish students and faculty, and the academy itself”.

Antisemitism vs anti-Zionism

What the non-legally-binding IHRA document does do, with the help of the examples, is shift the focus from real antisemitism to the perfectly respectable and growing phenomenon of [anti-Zionism](#). Anti-Zionism is sometimes described by pro-Israel stakeholders as “the new antisemitism”. It is essential, however, to distinguish clearly between the two.

Antisemitism may be simply defined as “hostility towards Jews because they are Jews”. Zionism, meanwhile, is a nationalist, political ideology that called for the creation of a Jewish state, and now supports the continued existence of Israel as such a state. Anti-Zionism is opposition to the exclusive character of the state of Israel and to Israeli policies, particularly its occupation of the West Bank. Antisemitism relates to Jews anywhere in the world; anti-Zionism relates only to Israel.

The IHRA document, taken as a whole, is susceptible to political abuse in that it makes it possible to conflate legitimate anti-Zionism with nefarious antisemitism. Israel’s energetic apologists, who were instrumental in promoting the document, conflate the two deliberately

and routinely.

To criticise the definition for its vacuity is thus to miss a central point. In this endeavour, the definition's very vagueness confers a political advantage. It enables Israel's defenders to weaponise the definition, especially against left-wing opponents, and to portray what in most cases is valid criticism of Israeli behaviour as the vilification and delegitimisation of the State of Israel.

Double standards

Israel is not the victim of double standards. On the contrary, it is the beneficiary of western double standards. Under the IHRA examples, it is antisemitic to require of Israel a behaviour "not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation". But this has nothing to do with anti-Jewish racism.

In any case, Israel is not a democracy. Even within its original borders, it is a flawed democracy at best, because of [discrimination](#) at multiple levels against its Palestinian citizens. But in the whole area under its rule, including the occupied Palestinian territories, Israel is an ethnocracy – a political system in which one ethnic group dominates another.

The superior status of Jews in Israel is enshrined in the [2018 nation-state law](#), the official confirmation that Israel is an apartheid state. The law [states that the right](#) to exercise national self-determination in Israel is "unique to the Jewish people". It establishes Hebrew as Israel's official language, and [downgrades Arabic](#) – which is widely spoken by Arab citizens of Israel – to a "special status".

Israel is the only member of the UN that enshrines its racism in law. It is therefore not antisemitic, but only right and proper, to expect Israel to behave like a democratic nation by giving equal rights to all its citizens.

Israel's friends in the US and Europe have claimed for the definition an international status that it does not have. They pushed hard for the adoption of the definition by as many governments as possible, because it can be used to intimidate critics of Israel and pro-Palestinian campaigners by tarnishing them with the brush of antisemitism.

In Britain, the top echelons of the Conservative Party have followed the Israel lobby's lead. Indeed, in the Conservative Party as a whole, the IHRA document seems to have acquired the status of holy writ.

Divisive consequences



The Labour Party discovered to its cost the divisive and damaging consequences of adopting this document. Initially, the party's code of conduct incorporated five of the IHRA examples verbatim, and an additional two with minor amendments.

This did not satisfy Israel's friends either inside or outside the party. The party was [bullied](#) by the Jewish Labour Movement, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Community Security Trust, and the Campaign Against Antisemitism to [adopt all the examples verbatim](#). Not to adopt all the examples exactly as they stood, it was misleadingly argued, was tantamount to a rejection of the definition.

Labour's national executive committee [caved in](#) and abandoned its amendments to the remaining two examples. In the Orwellian world of the post-full-adoption Labour Party, [many of the members](#) who have been suspended or expelled for the crime of antisemitism were themselves Jewish. Several [Jewish Labour Party members](#) have been investigated since 2016, nearly all on the basis of allegations of antisemitism. This made a mockery of the claim of Keir Starmer, who succeeded the allegedly antisemitic Jeremy Corbyn as leader, to be [making](#) the Labour Party a safe place for Jews.

Under the new regime, the Labour Party is slavishly subservient to the benighted definition. A local Labour Party branch recently tried to submit a motion endorsing B'Tselem's latest [report on Israeli apartheid](#). It said: "This Branch supports the call from B'Tselem for an end to the apartheid regime to 'ensure human rights, democracy, liberty and equality to all people, Palestinian and Israeli alike, living on the bit of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.'"

The motion was ruled out of order at the national level of the party on the grounds that, according to the IHRA's working definition, this could be seen as designating Israel a "racist endeavour".

Politically dangerous

In the rush to burnish its pro-Zionist credentials, the Labour Party turned against some of its most progressive Jewish members. Moshe Machover, the veteran Israeli British anti-Zionist, was [expelled and then reinstated](#) in 2017 after the Guardian [published a letter](#) of protest undersigned by 139 Labour Party members, including eminent Jewish lawyer Geoffrey Bindman, dismissing the insinuation of antisemitism as "personally offensive and politically dangerous".

But in 2020, Machover was [suspended](#) again. He [received](#) a 20-page letter from party bureaucrats containing a melange of old and new allegations of antisemitism, which Machover [described](#) as "full of lies" and part of a "Stalinist purge of the Labour Party". He considered resigning and slamming the door behind him, but decided to give the party inquisitors a chance to further disgrace themselves by expelling him.

The real question is: why did the British government adopt this fundamentally [flawed and deeply controversial document](#)? The government cannot claim in self-defence that it had not been warned about the potentially harmful consequences of adoption.

It actually [rejected](#) calls from the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee to insert two "clarifications" to the IHRA definition and examples: firstly, to clarify that it is not antisemitic to criticise the government of Israel, without additional evidence to suggest antisemitic

intent; and secondly, to clarify that “it is not antisemitic to hold the Israeli government to the same standards as other liberal democracies, or to take a particular interest in the Israeli government’s policies or actions, without additional evidence to suggest antisemitic intent”.

Funding threatened

The clearest clue that the present Conservative government is wedded to the IHRA definition as a means of curtailing debate and restricting free speech on Israel is contained [in a letter](#) from Gavin Williamson, the secretary of state for education, to university vice chancellors.

Sent in October 2020 amid a national crisis of the education sector due to the [Covid-19](#) pandemic, the letter noted that the number of universities that had adopted the IHRA definition remained “[shamefully low](#)”. The universities who ignored it were said to be [letting down](#) their staff and students, and their Jewish students in particular.

The education secretary insisted that these universities stop dragging their feet and formally endorse the IHRA definition. He threatened to [cut off funding](#) to universities at which antisemitic incidents occur and which had not signed up to the definition.

Williamson’s letter was not well received. He himself came across as authoritarian, while the tone of his missive was arrogant, hectoring and bullying. More worrying, however, was the content. It made no reference to any other form of bigotry, such as Islamophobia, homophobia or anti-Black racism. It did not escape notice that antisemitism was singled out for attention and punishment by a Conservative government that is renowned for its intensely relaxed [attitude towards Islamophobia](#).

The letter assumed that universities that did not formally endorse the IHRA definition were not taking antisemitism seriously, which is far from being the case. It did not allow for the fact that most universities have rules and disciplinary procedures for combatting most forms of discrimination and racism, including antisemitism. Even if a specific definition of antisemitism is needed, which is debatable, no reason was given for privileging the IHRA one.

Above all, the letter, or rather the ultimatum, was seen as a threat to free speech, which universities and the Department for Education have a statutory duty to uphold.

Ministerial diktat

Some English universities openly, and courageously, [rejected](#) the IHRA definition; about a fifth capitulated to the ministerial diktat by [signing up](#) to the definition; and the majority chose not to commit themselves one way or the other. My own university, Oxford, has fixed its colours firmly to the fence.

The [statement](#) on its website reads: “Oxford University aims to ensure that all students, whatever their background, have a fulfilling experience of higher education. To support us in our work, we have adopted (reflecting the position of the Office for Students) the IHRA definition of antisemitism as a guide to interpreting and understanding antisemitism, noting the clarifications recommended by the Home Affairs Select Committee. The IHRA definition does not affect the legal definition of racial discrimination, so does not change our approach to meeting our legal duties and responsibilities.” In other words, Oxford will draw on the

definition for intellectual enlightenment in thinking about antisemitism, but not as a guide for action.

In a [letter to the Guardian](#) published in November 2020, a group of 122 Palestinian and Arab academics, journalists and intellectuals expressed their concerns about the IHRA definition. Palestinian voices are rarely heard in the national debate on antisemitism and Israel-Palestine. This letter is therefore worth quoting at some length for the light it sheds on Palestinian perceptions and positions:

“In recent years, the fight against antisemitism has been increasingly instrumentalised by the Israeli government and its supporters in an effort to delegitimise the Palestinian cause and silence defenders of Palestinian rights. Diverting the necessary struggle against antisemitism to serve such an agenda threatens to debase this struggle and hence to discredit and weaken it.

“Antisemitism must be debunked and combated. Regardless of pretence, no expression of hatred for Jews as Jews should be tolerated anywhere in the world. Antisemitism manifests itself in sweeping generalisations and stereotypes about Jews, regarding power and money in particular, along with conspiracy theories and Holocaust denial. We regard as legitimate and necessary the fight against such attitudes. We also believe that the lessons of the Holocaust as well as those of other genocides of modern times must be part of the education of new generations against all forms of racial prejudice and hatred.

“The fight against antisemitism must, however, be approached in a principled manner, lest it defeat its purpose. Through ‘examples’ that it provides, the IHRA definition conflates Judaism with Zionism in assuming that all Jews are Zionists, and that the state of Israel in its current reality embodies the self-determination of all Jews. We profoundly disagree with this. The fight against antisemitism should not be turned into a stratagem to delegitimise the fight against the oppression of the Palestinians, the denial of their rights and the continued occupation of their land.”

Chilling effect

The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), Britain’s leading academic organisation for the study of the Middle East and North Africa, [issued a statement](#) expressing its profound concern about the pressure applied on universities by the government to adopt the IHRA definition.

It said Williamson’s intervention would have a “chilling effect” on academic freedom and the university sector in Middle East studies and beyond. While welcoming steps to root out antisemitism and all forms of racism from university campuses, the association came to the conclusion that this particular definition would have a detrimental impact on researchers and students.

After tracking the use of the IHRA definition in different contexts in the UK, it concluded that it was being deployed “to use the false charge of antisemitism to silence and delegitimise those who support Palestinian rights”. The anti-racist working groups within universities with whom it had consulted were all vehemently against adopting the IHRA definition.

The statement ended by urging universities “to protect academic freedom, to defend their autonomy against the government’s pressure to adopt the IHRA definition, and to retract

the definition” where it had been adopted.

Another call on universities to resist the government’s attempt to impose the IHRA definition came from an unexpected source: British academics who are also Israeli citizens. I am a member of this group, brought together by outrage at Williamson’s rude and crude intervention. It came as a surprise to discover that there are so many of us but, on the issue of his threat, we were all on the same page, regardless of our diverse academic disciplines, ages, statuses and political affiliations.

Attacking free speech

Our demarche took the form of a [long letter](#) sent in the last week of January to all vice chancellors of English universities and many academic senates. Since then, our letter has been signed by an impressive list of 110 supporters, all Israeli academics outside the UK, including many from Israel.

We tried to reach a wider public beyond the academy by publishing our letter in the mainstream media. Our request was either rejected or ignored by no less than 12 national newspapers and other media outlets. We were rather surprised and disappointed that not a single national paper saw fit to publish our letter or to report our initiative. But the letter was eventually [published](#) by the Jewish leftist online journal, Vashti.

The litany of rejections is in itself a comment on the reluctance of the mainstream media to give space to non-mainstream Jewish voices.

In our letter, we said:

“Fighting antisemitism in all its forms is an absolute must. Yet the IHRA document is inherently flawed, and in ways that undermine this fight. In addition, it threatens free speech and academic freedom and constitutes an attack both on the Palestinian right to self-determination, and the struggle to democratise Israel.”

We also pointed out that the government’s pressure on higher education institutions to adopt a definition for only one sort of racism singles out people of Jewish descent as deserving greater protection than others who today endure equal or more grievous manifestations of racism and discrimination.

Step in the wrong direction

We took strong exception to some of the “illustrations” of the IHRA document. Surely, we argued, it should be legitimate, not least in a university setting, to debate whether Israel, as a self-proclaimed Jewish state, is “a racist endeavour” or a “democratic nation”. We found it alarming that the document was being used to frame as antisemitic the struggle against Israel’s occupation and dispossession. No state should be shielded from such legitimate scholarly discussion, we opined, and nor should Israel.

Our letter went on to say that “as Israeli citizens settled in the UK, many of us of Jewish descent ... we demand that our voice, too, be heard: the IHRA document is a step in the wrong direction. It singles out the persecution of Jews; it inhibits free speech and academic freedom; it deprives Palestinians of a legitimate voice within the UK public space; and,

finally, it inhibits us, as Israeli nationals, from exercising our democratic right to challenge our government”.

In conclusion, we joined in the demand that UK universities remain firm in their commitment to academic freedom and freedom of speech. We urged UK universities to continue their fight against all forms of racism, including antisemitism. We repeated that the flawed IHRA document does a disservice to these goals.

We therefore called on all academic senates in England to reject the governmental diktat to adopt it, or, where adopted already, to act to revoke it. A copy of our letter was sent to the secretary of state for education but, so far, we have not heard back from him. It would seem that all the protests about his letter are, for Mr. Williamson, like water off a duck’s back.

The case of Ken Loach

A recent episode at Oxford highlighted the problematic implications of adopting or even semi-adopting the IHRA definition. Ken Loach – the multi-award-winning British filmmaker, lifelong anti-racist and social campaigner – was invited by his old Oxford college to a discussion that had nothing to do with Jews or Israel. This was [advertised as a joint event](#) between Torch, the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, and St Peter’s College.

Loach was billed to discuss his filmmaking career with the master of St Peter’s College, Judith Buchanan, who is also a professor of literature and film. The event was part of a broader university humanities cultural programme that fosters debate between artists and academics.

What followed was a well-orchestrated campaign of character assassination against a man who had spent his life championing the victims of oppression and discrimination, including Palestinians. Buchanan was bombarded with messages demanding she [cancel the event](#).

The Oxford University Jewish Society said it was deeply disappointed by the decision to host the event [because](#) “on numerous occasions, Loach has made remarks that are antisemitic under the IHRA definition, which was recently adopted by the University of Oxford”.

Marie van der Zyl, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, wrote to Buchanan, describing the decision to invite Loach to speak at her college as “[entirely unacceptable](#)”, and called for the event to be cancelled. She added that the board had been in touch with Jewish students at Oxford and “wholeheartedly [support their condemnation](#) of the event”. The categorical conclusion was: “This event should not take place.”

Combined pressure

The Union of Jewish Students, a national organisation that represents around [8,500 students](#), piled on the pressure.

“Just last summer”, [it tweeted](#), “the University of Oxford stated they were committed to addressing systemic racism wherever it may be found, including within their own community. We do not see how this event can be reconciled with that statement. It is an outrage that St Peter’s College has ignored the concerns of its Jewish students and we urge Judith Buchanan, Master of St Peter’s College, to remove this speaker from the event. UJS are offering support to the Jewish Society.”

Buchanan and Torch [stood firm](#) against the combined pressure from all Jewish quarters, and the event went ahead as planned. It was also streamed live on YouTube. The discussion was moderated by Professor Wes Williams, the director of Torch.

In my inexpert opinion, it was a wonderful cultural event, a model of its kind. Loach showed clips from his films [The Wind that Shakes the Barley](#) (2006) about Ireland in the early 20th century and [I, Daniel Blake](#) (2016) about the inhumanity of the social benefits system.

Loach talked about his films, and the worldview that informs them, eloquently and movingly in the discussion with Buchanan. There was no mention of Israel or Palestinians. After the webinar, Buchanan referred to the controversy surrounding it and stressed that neither the college nor the university believe in [no-platforming](#). In an email, however, she [apologised](#) to Jewish students for the “hurt” caused by the row over the event.

Rehashed allegations

The day after the event took place, on 9 February, the student union of Wadham College held a meeting regarding St Peter’s College and Loach. It is unusual for the students of one college to criticise the conduct of another college, but the Jewish students at Wadham evidently felt strongly about this issue.

The motion before the meeting went into [great detail](#) about comments made by Loach on different occasions that were considered to be antisemitic and complicit in Holocaust denial. The document generated more heat and venom; it was essentially a rehash of old allegations that had been comprehensively refuted in the past. The motion was to formally condemn Buchanan and St Peter’s College in poorly handling the concerns of Jewish students. The [censure motion was passed](#) with 150 votes for, 14 against and four abstentions.

Loach told the Telegraph, which [reported](#) on the controversy: “These recycled accusations are false and based on persistent misrepresentation and distortion.” The embattled filmmaker’s friends rallied to his defence. Some were members of [Jewish Voice for Labour](#), which in the past had [defended Corbyn](#) against false charges of antisemitism.

At their request, I sent a statement to be read at the student union’s meeting at Wadham College. It read:

“I deeply regret the attack by Wadham College students on Ken Loach. He has a strong and consistent record of opposing racism of every kind, including antisemitism. He is anti-Zionist but in no way antisemitic.

“He is charged with having made comments that are antisemitic under the IHRA definition. But that definition is utterly flawed. Its real purpose is to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism in order to suppress legitimate criticisms of Israeli policies. Antisemitism is hostility towards Jews because they are Jews.

“Under this proper definition Ken Loach is completely innocent. He is also an admirable person, a champion of social justice, and an outstanding artist. The attack on him undermines freedom of speech and that has no place in an academic institution. I therefore urge the students of Wadham College to stop their vilification of Ken Loach and to accord to him the respect that he so richly deserves.”

Smearing critics

The Loach affair vividly demonstrates the damage that the IHRA document can do to [free speech on campus](#). The document was used to smear a prominent left-wing critic of Israel and a defender of Palestinian rights, and to try to deny him a platform.

The attempt at no-platforming ultimately failed, but it caused totally unwarranted pain to the artist, placed the master of his old college in an extremely awkward position, stirred up a great deal of ill-feeling on both sides of the argument, wasted a great deal of time and energy that could have been put to better use, and, worst of all, in my humble opinion, was completely unnecessary, unjustified and unproductive. All it did was sour the atmosphere around an imaginative cultural event.

Are there any lessons to be learned from this sad episode in relation to the IHRA definition of antisemitism? First and foremost, it must be emphasised that antisemitism is not a fiction, as some people claim. It is a real problem at all levels of our society, including university campuses, and it needs to be confronted robustly wherever it rears its ugly head.

Secondly, it would be quite wrong to suggest that Jewish students who protest about antisemitism are inventing or exaggerating their feeling of hurt. Jewish students genuinely feel vulnerable and have a real need for protection by university authorities against any manifestation of bigotry, harassment or discrimination.

Fighting racism

The real question is this: does the IHRA definition provide that protection? If the Loach affair is anything to go by, it most certainly does not.

In the first place, the definition is implicitly premised on Jewish exceptionalism – on the notion that Jews are a special case and must be treated as such. This gets in the way of solidarity and cooperation with other groups who are also susceptible to racial prejudice, such as Arabs and Muslims. To be effective, the fight against racism needs to take place across the board and not in isolated corners.

Another serious flaw of the IHRA definition is that, as I and many others have argued, so many of its examples are not about Jews, but about the State of Israel. As a result, it comes across as more concerned with the protection of Israel than the protection of Jews.

It is true that for many Jewish-British students, Israel forms a vital component of their identity. It is unhelpful, however, to let Israel feature so prominently in the analysis of antisemitism. Israel is a controversial country whose democratic institutions are being constantly eroded, and whose oppression of Palestinians attracts ever-increasing international censure – and, most recently, a ruling that paves the way for an [investigation of war crimes](#) by the International Criminal Court. Despite its claim to the contrary, Israel does not represent all Jews globally, but only its own citizens, [a fifth](#) of whom are Palestinian.

British Jews are not collectively responsible for Israel's conduct, but the IHRA definition implicates them in Israel's affairs, and encourages them to target anyone they consider to be an enemy of the Jewish state.

Furthermore, it bears repeating that criticisms of Israel are not necessarily antisemitic. The

IHRA definition blurs the line between legitimate and illegitimate criticism. Nor does it protect Jewish students specifically; by aligning them too closely with Israel, it does the exact opposite. In the long term, therefore, it does not serve the interests of Jewish students.

No definition needed

The question arises, finally: do we need a definition of antisemitism at all? My own view is that we do not. The very term “antisemitic” is problematic because Arabs are Semites too. I prefer the term “anti-Jewish racism”. What we need is a code of conduct to protect all minority groups, including Jews, against discrimination and harassment while protecting freedom of speech for all members of universities.

The universal right to freedom of expression is already embodied in UK law by the [Human Rights Act](#) of 1998, which prohibits public authorities from acting in a way that is incompatible with that right. Specific protection for freedom of expression in universities is provided by the 1986 [Education Act](#).

We do not therefore need any more legislation; all we need is common sense and honesty in applying the existing legislation. If a person attacks Israel, we should not ask whether the attack is antisemitic or not. And we should certainly not have to ask whether their statement falls foul of any of the seven Israel-focused IHRA illustrations of what might constitute antisemitism.

We should simply ask whether what they say about Israel is true or false. If true, the charge should be investigated further to ascertain whether the motive behind it is hostility or prejudice towards Jews and, if it is, appropriate action should be taken. And if the charge is false, it would be futile to speculate about the motives behind it. The debate about both anti-Jewish racism and Israel should be based on evidence, not on political or sectarian affiliations.

The essential point is that universities in the UK must have the autonomy to oversee and regulate all activities on their campuses, according to their own circumstances, free from external interference. Protecting freedom of speech on campuses is both a moral obligation and a legal duty.

The IHRA definition conflicts directly with this duty. I am old-fashioned enough to warm to the idea that a university is a pile of books and a community of scholars. In my kind of university, there is no room for colonial-style autocrats such as Williamson and his ilk.

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