

## Defining Antisemitism

Peter Jones

Prime Minister Carney's [June 1st speech](#) on antisemitism is a necessary and welcome recognition that anti-Jewish violence and intolerance are on the rise in Canada and must be confronted.

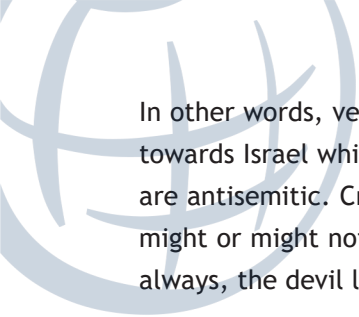
Jewish leaders in Canada welcomed the speech. Some, however, noted that he failed to address the idea that a key cause of antisemitism is rising levels of criticism of Israel. For example, [Rabbi Yael Splansky said](#), "When Canadian elected leaders publicly condemn Israel, the world's only Jewish state, Jewish Canadians pay the price." [Rabbi Stephen Wernick said that](#), by failing to recognise that it is not possible to distinguish between antisemitism and criticism of Israel and Zionism as its foundation, Carney did not go far enough in tackling the root cause of the issue.

Herein lies a problem.

Mr. Carney noted that Canada has adopted the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's \(IHRA\) definition of antisemitism](#) of 2016. Crucially, and as was specifically noted by the Prime Minister, this definition states that, "Manifestations (of antisemitism) might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic."

### At a glance...

- Prime Minister Carney addressed antisemitism in a speech on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026 but received criticism from some Jewish leaders who believe that it is not possible to distinguish between antisemitism and criticism of Israel.
- So, the question becomes; is the rejection of Zionism antisemitic?
- The author argues that a rejection of Israel's right to exist on the basis of historic Zionism is antisemitic, because it denies the legitimate right, as recognized by the UN, of the Jewish people to a homeland which would live in peace with its neighbours in a part of Palestine.
- But he also argues that rejection of Zionism as it has evolved in the hands of the Israeli right-wing is not antisemitic - it is the rejection of an ideology which violently negates the legitimate rights of others.
- Polling which reveals a steady drop in support for Israel amongst the Canadian public is making this point. While some may be motivated by antisemitism, a majority of Canadians who are turning away from Israel still support its right to exist.
- The ultimate effect of a demand that Canadians must implement the IHRA definition of antisemitism as national policy, and thereby move towards unquestioning acceptance of the expansionist policies of Israel in Gaza and the West Bank as legitimate acts of self-defence, will be to weaken support for Israel in Canada, not strengthen it.



In other words, verbal or physical expressions of hatred towards Israel which are motivated by a hatred of Jews are antisemitic. Criticism of Israeli government policies might or might not be, depending on how it is done. As always, the devil lies in the details.

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Let me be clear at this point: rejection of the State of Israel's right to exist, and therefore defend itself, simply because it is Jewish, is antisemitic. Similarly, rejection of Zionism as the founding doctrine of Israel is also antisemitic, as is the inherent equation of Zionism with racism.

But, and here is where nuance rears its ugly head, this is the case in connection with the stated aims of Zionism as it existed when Israel was founded; a movement dedicated to a homeland for the Jewish people in part of historic Palestine, but one which recognized that the majority of the inhabitants of that land, who were not Jewish, also had rights. This was the basis for the [1947 United Nations General Assembly resolution](#) authorizing the creation of the State of Israel and a state for the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. It was the basis for the [Israeli Declaration of Independence](#) of 14 May, 1948. Though there is strong evidence that many involved [didn't necessarily believe it](#), this remains the official ethos and commitment of the State of Israel.

The form of Zionism represented by the far-right coalition governing Israel today is quite different. It explicitly rejects the right of the Palestinians to a homeland, or any other rights, and calls for their expulsion - by force, if necessary - from their ancestral lands. It recognizes only the right of Jews to settle and [claim all of the land of Palestine](#).

So, the question becomes; is the rejection of Zionism antisemitic? I would argue that a rejection of Israel's right to exist on the basis of [historic](#) Zionism is antisemitic, because it denies the legitimate right, as recognized by the UN, of the Jewish people to a homeland which would live in peace with its neighbours in a part of Palestine. But I would also

argue that rejection of Zionism as it has evolved in the hands of the Israeli right-wing is *not* antisemitic - it is the rejection of an ideology which violently negates the legitimate rights of others.

To adhere to this nuanced approach is not morally equivalent hair-splitting. It is to reject intolerance and violence employed by extremists on *both sides*, as opposed to legitimising it only if it is carried out by one of them. Because I reject the definition of Zionism adhered to by the present Israeli Government does not mean I accept what Hamas did on October 7th. That was an act of barbaric terrorism. But I also reject the disproportionate way the Israeli Government has used its response to October 7th to seize more Palestinian land, and force Palestinians from their homes in both Gaza and the West Bank. This is not legitimate self-defence.

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The IHRA definition has been [criticized](#) because it makes a broad statement, but then deliberately fails to provide adequate guidance as to what it means in practice. It provides 11 general examples of antisemitic behaviour, but seven of them deal with criticism of Israel rather than with antisemitism as an expression of hatred towards Jews. In this way, even though it makes mention of the general idea that criticism of Israel "similar to that leveled against any other country" is not antisemitic, the IHRA definition establishes in practice a link between criticism of Israel and antisemitism. In short, it constructs an argument that criticism of Israel's behaviour towards the Palestinians is antisemitism because it questions Israel's right to defend itself or to pursue Zionism. But, of course, the policies and the definition of Zionism that the present government of Israel is defending and pursuing involve an expansionist vision which rejects Palestinian rights recognised by international law.

The effect of the IHRA definition is to create a dynamic whereby it's ok to criticize something like, say, Israeli health-care policy in a way which is "similar to that (criticism) leveled at any other

country,” but the moment you cross into comments on the Palestinian issue you are held to be criticizing Israel’s right to defend itself based on its present concept of Zionism and you are open to accusations of being antisemitic.

It’s a trap, which holds out the seeming promise of allowing for criticism of Israel “similar to that leveled against any other country,” but denies any criticism in practice when it strays into territory which the Israeli right does not want to talk about. It is the weaponization of antisemitism; the turning of it into cudgel to be wielded against anyone who criticizes the way the present Government of Israel and its supporters treat the Palestinian issue. This was deliberate. As Israeli-born Holocaust and genocide scholar [Omer Bartov notes](#), “It was under Netanyahu’s guidance that the IHRA definition of antisemitism was pushed by Israeli representatives around the world, making criticism of Israeli policies tantamount to antisemitism, antisemitism tantamount to genocidal intent, and the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation tantamount to both.”

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Antisemitism is an ancient form of bigotry which has taken many guises [throughout history](#). Most modern forms depict the Jewish people as collective authors of a malevolent conspiracy to dominate the world through “control” over government, finance, the media and so forth. Attacks by Trump supporters and former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on prominent Jewish figures such as [George Soros](#) for his supposed backing of a Jewish “conspiracy” to “replace” “real” Americans and Europeans with “lesser” bloodlines and thereby dilute American/European purity, are an example of classic tropes of antisemitism; that of shadowy, puppet-master like Jewish figures manipulating the world to achieve ends which are damaging to the racial purity of hard-working (read: white) Christian people. These vicious lies have real-world consequences. In October of 2018, [Robert Bowers murdered 11 people](#) at a synagogue in Pittsburgh because he was convinced that Jews were behind a shadowy effort to “replace” white Americans.

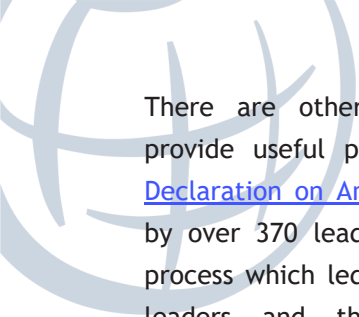
By making antisemitism a vehicle of political manipulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the present Israeli Government and its supporters may win a short-term point. But the longer-term implication will be to weaken the opprobrium in which antisemitism is rightly held. Criticism of Israel’s policies on the West Bank or Gaza as violations of international law are not antisemitism. People of conscience are not going to stop criticizing the policies of Israel towards the Palestinians just because they are accused of the IHRA definition of antisemitism; they are ultimately going to stop believing that such accusations have validity.

[Polling](#) which reveals a steady drop in support for Israel amongst the Canadian public is making this point. While some may be motivated by antisemitism, a majority of Canadians who are turning away from Israel still support its right to exist. But they don’t like what they’re seeing on their television screens from Gaza and the West Bank - and they’re not going to appreciate being called antisemites because they feel this way.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is over a century old. In that time, it has seen the emergence of legions of experts on both sides whose job it is to pore over ancient maps, seeking to show that their side has a more legitimate historical claim; who engage in archaeological digs to try to show that their side was there “first;” and who are masters of the art of putting forward statements which, though seemingly balanced, contain subtle biases. As scholar of discourse, [Sue Blackwell notes](#), the IHRA definition is a “prime example of language being both the site of, and stake in, struggles for power.”

Numerous critics of the IHRA definition have made this point. [David Feldman](#), a leading scholar of antisemitism throughout history has written, “I fear this definition is imprecise, and isolates antisemitism from other forms of bigotry.... there is a danger that the overall effect will place the onus on Israel’s critics to demonstrate they are not antisemitic.” The debate over the IHRA definition has raged [for many years](#).

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There are other definitions of antisemitism that provide useful points of reference. [The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism of 2021](#) has been signed by over 370 leading Israeli and Jewish figures. The process which led to it was launched by many Israeli leaders and thinkers specifically because they objected to the way the Israeli right hijacked the IHRA process. The Jerusalem Declaration counters the IHRA by specifically pointing out various acts which are **not** antisemitic, but which are routinely labelled as such by the Israeli Government and many supporters of the IHRA definition.

These include non-violent actions which, in the words of the Declaration, “Support the Palestinian demand for justice and the full grant of their political, national, civil and human rights.” Furthermore, “Criticizing or opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism, or arguing for a variety of constitutional arrangements for Jews and Palestinians in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean” is not antisemitic. Nor is “Evidence-based criticism of Israel .... (including)... the conduct of Israel in the West Bank and Gaza... It is not antisemitic to point out systematic racial discrimination.... Boycott, divestment and sanctions are commonplace, non-violent forms of political protest against states. In the Israeli case they are not, in and of themselves, antisemitic.”

Another useful definition is the so-called “[NEXUS document](#),” which explores the nexus between antisemitism and criticism of Israel and Zionism. Composed by the Nexus Task Force, a group of mostly American policy and academic experts on Judaism and Israel, this document also outlines a nuanced approach which recognises that criticism of Israel’s policies regarding the Palestinian issue are not antisemitic, *per se*;

“As a general rule, criticism of Zionism and Israel, opposition to Israel’s policies, or nonviolent political action directed at the State of Israel and/or its policies should not, as such, be deemed antisemitic. Using accusations of antisemitism as a tool to suppress criticism of Israel is dangerous on many levels. It distracts attention from bona fide antisemitism, infringes on the principle of freedom

of expression, and militates against constructive dialogue and debate among people with differing opinions. Even contentious, strident, or harsh criticism of Israel for its policies and actions, including those that led to the creation of Israel, is not *per se* illegitimate or antisemitic.”

The point is that simply relying on the IHRA definition is not enough. Those who call for it to be, [in the words of Rabbi Wernick](#), implemented “across every federal institution” of government, are trying to lock Canada into a definition of antisemitism which would dramatically reduce the space for criticism of Israel’s policies towards the Palestinian issue. The ultimate effect of a *demand* that Canadians must implement the IHRA definition of antisemitism as national policy, and thereby move towards unquestioning acceptance of the expansionist policies of Israel in Gaza and the West Bank as legitimate acts of self-defence, will be to weaken support for Israel in Canada, not strengthen it.

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Canada has a serious and growing problem of violence against Jews which must be confronted. It is fundamentally not acceptable that children of *any* religious or ethnic group should be threatened in their schools. It is fundamentally not acceptable that *any* place of worship should be attacked. It is fundamentally not acceptable that members of *any* ethnic or religious group should not be safe to walk the streets wearing the symbols of their identity. That these things are currently happening significantly more often to Jews in Canada than they are to any other group is a fact that cannot be denied and must be addressed.

But it is equally unacceptable that Canada and Canadians must unquestioningly accept a definition of antisemitism which effectively means that all criticism of Israel’s approach to the Palestinian issue should be automatically equated with this terrible and ancient form of bigotry.



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