The IHRA Definition of Antisemitism & Palestinian Solidarity

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1. WHAT IS IHRA DEFINITION?
International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Definition of Antisemitism

7 of 11 examples of IHRA definition of antisemitism pertain to Israel, including:

• Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.

• Applying double standards by requiring of it [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.

The focus on the left does not match with the actual incidents of hate crimes / antisemitic acts.
Ambiguity Around Legal Status & Function

• University of Central Lancashire cancelled an event about BDS following the gov’t adoption of IHRA definition, claiming that “legal status” of pro-Palestine events had changed.

• Many Palestinians and supporters of Palestine were targeted and harassed.

• I became the subject of a campaign to have me fired from University of Bristol due to an article I wrote about Israel in 2011.

But what does “adoption” actually mean? Legally, it has no meaning.
2. FIGHTING PROXY WARS
“[my supporters] genuine alarm about my safety” has “missed something very important about the charge of the ‘new anti-Semitism’ and whom, ultimately, its target is…When the professor from Haifa University branded me an anti-Semite, I wasn’t his real target. People like me are attacked on a regular basis, but we are considered human shields by the ‘new anti-Semitism’ machine. Its real target is the Palestinians.”

The battle around antisemitism (in Labour), in connection with IHRA definition is “a *proxy war* in which outside bodies – the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council, neither of them noted for balanced criticism of Israel – are weighing in, aided by generous media coverage”
3. WHAT MAKES A DEFINITION USEFUL FOR FIGHTING RACISM?
A Good (Politically Useful) Definition of Racism

• Should be **generalizable** to broader cases
• Should focus on **core** rather than **peripheral** features
• Should carefully contemplate the **context of its application**. We should resist the impulse to use definitions (such as the IHRA definition) in contexts they were not intended for.
What will Happen When it is Operationalized?

Definitions that are excessively context-specific and group-specific fail to fulfill their mandate and risk giving too much power to administrators and institutions charged with implementing the definitions. In the world we inhabit, every definition of racism will necessary be implemented in a racist society and often by racists.
General Principles

• Don’t start from scratch Begin with the concept of hate crime (not non-crime). Build on existing jurisprudence of criminal acts so as to strengthen recognition of their racist dimensions.

• Intersectionality In the contemporary context, most perpetrators of hate crime in Europe and North America are influenced by antisemitism and Islamophobia. Racism is intersectional. Intersectional definitions are better than group specific ones.

• Narrowness = Precision The narrower we can be in our definitions while accurately capturing the phenomenon, the better.

• Free Speech Matters Resist the right wing appropriation of the concept of free speech. The right to free speech is a condition of possibility for our ability to protest.
4.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?
Responding & Resisting

• IHRA definition should be resisted in precise & strategic ways (using the law to expose its flaws & challenge its free speech violations, & claiming our democratic rights to protest)

• As with any proxy war, don’t fall into the trap of confusing the proxy war (on the Labour Party) with the actual war (on Palestine)

• We should be wary of allowing this debate (this proxy war) to deflect from or weaken Palestine solidarity
Further Reading on IHRA definition


• Rebecca Ruth Gould, “The IHRA definition’s imprecision makes it a threat to free speech,” Prospect Magazine (2018)