



March 29, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

On behalf of California Scholars for Academic Freedom,\* we write in response to your comment that “the Biden Administration enthusiastically embraces the 2016 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s Working Definition of Anti-Semitism, including its examples” (letter of February 23, to the American Zionist Movement). We fully share your view that we need strong tools for opposing antisemitism and all forms of racism, but our judgment is that the IHRA definition, with “its examples,” is anything but such a positive tool. Instead, it exploits opposition to antisemitism to stifle support for the rights of Palestinians, including their criticisms of the Israeli state, specifically that state’s relationship to Palestinians and Palestine. Moreover, by its instrumental and false use of the term *antisemitism*, the IHRA definition undermines the very use of the term, thus weakening the urgent struggle against antisemitism. Opponents of antisemitism, and champions of human rights without exceptions, must repudiate the IHRA definition, and not embrace it.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism errs in conflating Jews with both the Israeli state and Zionism (a political position). In point of fact, an increasing number of Jews criticize and oppose Zionism, and they are no less Jewish for doing so. So too, the State of Israel does not represent the Jewish people, nor does criticism of the Israeli state mean harm to, much less the destruction of, the Jewish people or Judaism. To the contrary, such criticism supports more inclusive and substantive principles of justice for all who live in the region.

Once we view any criticism of the State of Israel as an act of antisemitism, we violate the most basic principles of free speech and political dissent. When this happens on US campuses, we sacrifice the ideal of the university as a site for open debate on even the most controversial issues in a given historical moment of our public lives.

Fully legitimate criticisms of Israeli state policy have focused on the state’s unequal rights for its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens; its continued practice of land appropriation and illegal settlements; and its long history of dispossessing Palestinians of their homes and homeland. To inhibit such criticism, or to brand critics of Israeli policy or of Zionism as anti-Semites, gives the Israeli state a singular protection from all legitimate criticism that no state should ever be afforded.

We urge you to recognize that the best way to combat antisemitism is by situating that struggle within the broader struggle against all forms of racism, including xenophobia, anti-Arab and

\*\*CALIFORNIA SCHOLARS FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM (cs4af) is a group of over 200 scholars who defend academic freedom, the right of shared governance, and the First Amendment rights of faculty and students in the academy and beyond. California Scholars for Academic Freedom investigates legislative and administrative infringements on freedom of speech and assembly, and it raises the consciousness of politicians, university regents and administrators, faculty, students and the public at large through open letters, press releases, petitions, statements, and articles. Our vigilance extends to violations of academic freedom anywhere in the United States and abroad, for we recognize that violations of academic freedom anywhere are threats to academic freedom everywhere.



anti-Palestinian racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, and racism against Indigenous peoples. In this broader struggle, what must be opposed is not criticisms of the Israeli state, but the stubborn antisemitism present in the United States stoked by white nationalism and supremacy. In our time, this antisemitism is fostered, moreover, by rightwing Evangelicals who promote universal Jewish relocation to Israel as part of their theological vision, thereby denying Jewish-Americans their rightful place in the United States.

We note that many Jewish organizations, including Jewish Voice for Peace and Jews for Economic and Racial Justice, as well as the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, oppose the Israeli state's practices of Jewish supremacy that deny Palestinians' rights of self-determination on their own lands. So too, even the Progressive Israel Coalition—which includes liberal Zionist organizations such as J Street, the New Israel Fund, and T'ruah (the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights)—[opposes codification of the IHRA definition](#) on the grounds that it would “suppress legitimate free speech,” including specifically “advocacy for Palestinian rights.”

To conduct a campaign to suppress and stigmatize those who legitimately seek recognition and repair for the violation of Palestinian human rights is unjust. This effort to debunk as antisemitism the Palestinian struggle for freedom and self-determination exploits the emotional charge of antisemitism while sacrificing its actual meaning. The IHRA definition of antisemitism is a counter-productive and a dangerous misuse of language at a moment when recovering from the harms of the Trump presidency requires renewed care for truthfulness in the use of words in our political discourse.

As an organization committed to the defense of academic freedom, California Scholars for Academic Freedom must speak out against the project of constraining legitimate political speech deemed illegitimate by the IHRA definition. The IHRA definition represents a direct attack on the rights of expression with regard to both the *struggle against* antisemitism and *the struggle for* Palestinian freedom and equality.

We thus urge you to withdraw your support for the IHRA definition and to join us in supporting protections for legitimate and protected speech. Only on that crucial foundation can we work together to oppose all forms of racism—including anti-Jewish and anti-Palestinian hatred—in a principled, consistent, and robust manner. We urge you, in short, to reject the IHRA definition in favor of adopting a definition supported by international law and a concern for human rights for all humanity, without exceptions.

Sincerely,

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