

Regarding the possible adoption by the Australian Government of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism

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As the Australian Zionist representative roof body, the Zionist Federation of Australia is committed to advocating for the State of Israel on behalf of the Jewish community in Australia and fostering a deep connection between Australia and Israel.

Antisemitism is [increasing around the world](#). For instance, a [December 2018 poll](#) found that 40 per cent of European Jews reported a daily fear of being physically attacked. Indeed, more Jews [were killed](#) in antisemitic attacks globally in 2018 than in any other year for decades.

Though much less intense, antisemitism is [also increasing in Australia](#). 2020 saw 20 per cent more antisemitic incidents than the six-year average. It also saw a doubling in physical assaults and a ten per cent increase in verbal abuse.

Many antisemitic actions are directed at Jews and are easy to identify. However, some people don't know where the line between legitimate criticism of Israel and racist commentary about Israel lies. (Antisemitic incidents always spike in times of Israeli–Palestinian violence. During the Hamas–Israel violence of May 2021, the number of antisemitic incidents in Australia was double that of May 2020.)

The IHRA working definition of antisemitism explains what antisemitism is, and how not to cross the line between legitimate and illegitimate criticism of Israel.

Reasons for adopting the working definition

Should the Government adopt the definition, the manner in which it does so depends to a large extent on the purpose for adopting it. Is the adoption merely to satisfy membership criteria of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), or is the Government attempting to help curb the increase in antisemitism in Australia?

Main role - education

The working definition's main role is as a resource to help educate people as to what antisemitism is, and what is (and what is not) legitimate criticism of Israel. It complements the many anti-racism resources developed by government and non-government agencies for the same broad purpose—to allow the public to engage in free speech while helping the well-meaning to avoid inadvertently offending minority groups who have long been subject to discriminatory behaviour.

Secondary role - yardstick

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• President Jeremy Leibler • Chief Executive Officer Ginette Searle •

• Constituent Organisations State Zionist Councils of: ACT • New South Wales • Queensland • South Australia • Victoria • Western Australia

• Affiliated Organisations: Ameinu • ARZA • Australian Forum of Russian Jewry • Australasian Union of Jewish Students • Australian Zionist Youth Council • Friends of Likud • Jewish National Fund Australia
• Maccabi Australia • Mercaz Masorti Australasia • Mizrahi Organisation • National Council of Jewish Women Australia • Union for Progressive Judaism • United Israel Appeal Australia
• Women's International Zionist Organisation •

A subordinate role of the working definition is to act as a yardstick, to measure whether an action or cumulative actions by an individual or group amounts to antisemitism (whether intended or otherwise).

The yardstick works in two ways. Because there is uncertainty among some in the community as to where the line between legitimate and illegitimate criticism of Israel lies, many Jewish students and workers feel uncomfortable telling an individual that they believe she or he has crossed that line. The working definition, adopted by the Government and implemented across a wide range of government and other agencies, would provide these Jewish Australians with something to point to.

In a similar vein, most businesses and organisations ban racist and bullying behaviour and provide appropriate sanctions if an employee is found to be racist or a bully. The working definition does not recommend what should happen if someone is found to be antisemitic. However, if a business or organisation has regard to the working definition, they can more easily determine if alleged antisemitic behaviour was, in fact, antisemitic. The wider the adoption of the working definition across Australian Government and other agencies, the more universal and therefore consistent such determinations will be.

How to adopt the working definition

The Prime Minister and ministers have frequently expressed a repudiation of antisemitism and other forms of racism. Similarly, senior figures of the Australian Labor Party—not least Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese and Foreign Affairs Spokeswoman Penny Wong—have repeatedly endorsed the working definition.

While the adoption of the working definition is an Australian Government decision, the ZFA firmly believes the process in adopting it should be bipartisan. This issue is too important to risk being a victim of politics.

A Parliamentary motion

The ZFA therefore recommends that, should the Australian Government adopt the working definition, the first step in doing so is a Parliamentary motion moved by the Prime Minister, with the Opposition Leader being invited to speak to it. The ZFA also believes that the Government's planned implementation procedure should be shared with the Opposition, to maximise buy-in.

Practical adoption

The ZFA believes that practicality be utilised; rather than adoption of the definition merely being a Parliamentary endorsement of it (along with an appeal for organisations to use it), the ZFA urges the Australian Government to ensure that all Australian Government agencies have regard to the working definition when:

- educating their staff or the public about racism (including in-person training and online resources)
- determining whether alleged antisemitism by or against their staff was, in fact, antisemitism

The ZFA believes the Australian Government, should it adopt the working definition, should strongly urge state governments to similarly adopt the definition.

Given the worrying rise in antisemitism in recent years, the ZFA also believes it is important that civil society organisations—including universities—be strongly encouraged to adopt the working definition.

Rising trends of antisemitism are reflected on Australian campuses, which saw a dramatic increase in both the number and seriousness of antisemitic incidents during the period of the May 2021 Hamas–Israel confrontation. The Australasian Union of Jewish Students (AUJS) documented many of these incidents, including:

- verbal and online abuse of Jewish students (including death threats against AUJS leaders)
- cornering of individual Jews on campus by groups of protesters to physically intimidate them

- tutors and lecturers making anti-Israel comments and then singling out Jewish students to defend Israel

Because of this intimidation, many Jewish students, from across Australia, stayed away from campuses or removed clothing that identified them as Jews whilst on campus during this period. Even before the recent spike, Australian Jewish students were reporting an increase in antisemitic incidents.

This being the case, the ZFA believes that an early adoption by Australian universities of the working definition (for education and yardstick purposes) would be of immense long-term value to civility of public debate in Australia.

A note about free speech and criticism of Israel

The working definition does not stifle free speech. It acts to define antisemitic speech or action, but does not, in and of itself, seek to prevent it.

Australian Government agencies, as well as many businesses and organisations like universities, have anti-racism and anti-bullying policies. That is, prohibiting racism and bullying is not considered by these agencies, businesses and organisations as censorious of free speech or academic freedom. These institutions provide guidance as to what constitutes racism and what relevant stakeholders should do if they are confronted with racism. The working definition complements such guidance, by providing clarity on what is, and what is not, antisemitism. It does not, however, add to (nor call to add to) restrictions on free speech that already exist.

In the same way, the working definition cannot reasonably be held to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel. Indeed, the definition specifically says, “criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.” Among the 11 illustrative examples that form part of the definition, there are some that relate to Israel. For instance, examples identify as antisemitism holding Jews collectively or individually responsible for Israeli actions; denying Jews the right to self-determination; or holding Israel to a standard not expected or demanded of other countries.

One does not need to do any of the above to meaningfully—even passionately—criticise Israel or Israeli actions.

Adoption of the IHRA working definition

The working definition has been adopted by over 450 different entities, international organisations, corporations, sporting teams, universities and 30 countries. They include the following:

- Organization of American States
- European Parliament and the Council of Europe
- Dozens of state, provincial and local councils in many different countries
- Volkswagen, Deutsche Bank
- The English Football Association (and English Premier League), along with several football clubs, including Chelsea and Bayern Munich
- Over half the universities in the United Kingdom, including Oxford and Cambridge