

Contemporary discourses on general definitions of antisemitism

A review article

The logo consists of the letters 'NJ' in a white, serif font, positioned inside a blue circular background.

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ABSTRACT • This review article gives an overview of the two most influential definitions of antisemitism in Europe: the non-legally binding working definition by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and the so-called Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. Furthermore, the article explains where the definitions come from and summarises the current debates and discourses on how to define antisemitism in view of the history and politics of Europe. It also gives brief attention to the Nexus Document as a third influential definition, which plays a more important role in the United States. The article ends with a reflection on the definition offered by the historian Helen Fein, which is more action-based, and Amos Morris-Reich's statement of the importance of reflecting on the role of language and the ability of language to create hate and to hurt.

Introduction

As a doctoral candidate at Åbo Akademi University working on a doctoral dissertation with the working title 'Performing antisemitism: the affective power of performative display of discrimination, prejudice, and conspiracy in Europe', I am dependent on a strong and reflective definition of antisemitism. I was soon faced with the harsh reality of criticism of my research project, stemming, for example, from my adoption of the non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) without a wider consideration of reasons for this choice. I henceforth refer to this definition as the IHRA definition. This is the background to my attempt here to condense the enormous contemporary discourse concerning general definitions of antisemitism as a preventative and combatting working tool in Europe.

It took almost a year of reading, discussing, arguing and travelling to conferences and international workshops to penetrate below the surface of this significant discussion, which will act as a foundation and hopefully develop into a guiding chapter in my doctoral thesis.

I found it interesting to look up the definition of 'definition', which is described on the homepage of the dictionary by Merriam-Webster as 'a statement of expressing the essential nature of something' (Merriam-Webster 2022). I would like to ask the reader to keep this definition in mind while reading the following review article.

There seems to be no end of newspaper articles, panel discussions and statements, international workshops, conferences and so forth about what general definition of antisemitism it is best to use. Nevertheless, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance's general policy recommendations

1, 6 and 9, which deal with combatting and preventing antisemitism in European societies (see ECRI 2018), demand action plans to prevent and fight emergent challenges of rising antisemitism, which also undermine democracy. Contemporary European discourses hover around two opposing definitions of antisemitism. One is the so-called non-legally binding working definition by IHRA from May 2016 (IHRA 2016a). The other is a later definition, signed in March 2021 by many scholars and academics in the realms of antisemitism studies and related fields. These scholars point out that the definition by the IHRA is insufficient, as it is currently used to silence voices critical of the modern state of Israel and, even worse, classifies vindicated anti-Zionist criticism as a form of antisemitism *per se* (Brenner 2021). This later definition of antisemitism seeks to present a markedly different alternative to the definition of the IHRA and to substitute it as a working tool against antisemitism. Therefore, it is often referred to as ‘an answer to the non-legally binding working definition of the IHRA and only comprehensible as such’ (*ibid.*), and is seen as critical of the rapid and ongoing adoption of the IHRA definition by many EU member states. In this article, I refer to the so-called Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism or JDA (JDA 2021).

Apart from these two different definitions of antisemitism, I would also like to briefly mention the Nexus Document: this is a collection of guidelines concerning what is to be regarded as antisemitic and what not in relation to the state of Israel and antisemitism from November 2020 (Nexus 2021a). This document has been produced by the Nexus Task Force, which is affiliated with the Bard Center for the Study of Hate (BSCH), which consists of twenty-one scholars and members from the USA (Nexus 2021b). This

so-called Nexus Document is tailored for a mostly US-American context and originates from within this context. As the focus of my doctoral research is to highlight European experiences of performative antisemitism, I will give less attention to the Nexus document in this review.

The non-legally binding definition of antisemitism by the IHRA, May 2016

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is an organisation which brings governments and experts together to ‘strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust education, research and remembrance and to uphold the commitments to the 2000 Stockholm Declaration’ (IHRA 2016b). Furthermore, we learn on the organisation’s website that the former Swedish prime minister Göran Persson was the initiator of the IHRA in 1998, back then known as ITF (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research). Today the IHRA is composed of thirty-five member countries, including Finland, which feel obliged to work as indicated above against Holocaust denial and antisemitism (see *ibid.*).

The IHRA’s network of trusted experts share their knowledge on early warning signs of present-day genocide and education on the Holocaust. This knowledge supports policymakers and educational multipliers in their efforts to develop effective curricula, and it informs government officials and NGOs active in global initiatives for genocide prevention. (IHRA 2016b)

I would like to take a moment to look more closely at this IHRA definition. I start by mentioning what the organisation writes

in its preamble, entitled 'About the IHRA non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism' (IHRA 2016a). The IHRA considers itself to be 'the only intergovernmental organization ... focused solely on Holocaust-related issues' and claims that 'there must be clarity about what antisemitism is' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the IHRA points out that its team, the committee on antisemitism, consists of experts who have built 'international consensus around a non-legally binding working definition on antisemitism' (*ibid.*). The IHRA claims that its working definition of antisemitism has empowered several member organisations to address the rise in hatred and discrimination on their respective national levels (see *ibid.*), which is shown by the growing number of EU member states and others, European cities, companies, committees, institutions and so forth which recognise and adopt the definition (IHRA 2016c).

The main core of the IHRA definition is short; it was adopted by the plenary session on 26 May 2016:

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' (IHRA 2016a).

I would like to focus on the fact that the definition talks about possible hate speech and physical forms of hatred towards Jewish or even non-Jewish individuals. The very fact that physical and rhetorical forms of hatred and violence motivated by antisemitism are not only seen as targeting Jewish individuals makes it applicable in the following example from 2018 concerning the case of the young

German, Adam A. Against the advice of his Jewish friend, Adam A. wore a kippa, which he had earlier received as a gift, on the streets of Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, just to make a point that the warning of his Jewish friend was exaggerated. Unfortunately, only minutes later Adam A. got bad-mouthed, attacked and beaten with a belt, even though he was filming the perpetrator with his mobile phone at the same time (Betschka and Dinger 2018).

The IHRA definition seems quite condensed, yet comes with a certain amount of explanation and eleven examples of what counts as antisemitism. The agenda of this working definition includes, in particular, down-playing the horrors of the Holocaust as well as what is called Holocaust distortion, which represents another major subject on the agenda of the IHRA. On its website, we also learn about a toolkit for combatting antisemitism (IHRA 2016a).

The IHRA also refers to how antisemitism can be manifested as criticism of the modern state of Israel:

- 'Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations';
- '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 a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.' (IHRA 2016a)

These are three of the examples accompanying the IHRA definition which have, I believe, led and still lead to controversial debates and disagreements. These examples of antisemitism in the context of the modern state of Israel afford justifications for



Second Jewish cemetery in Freudental district of Ludwigsburg after the desecration of 1 October 2007.

the claim that the IHRA definition is politicised and used to shut down voices critical of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the conflict that regularly wells up violently between Israel and Gaza.

These discussions are often encountered in Germany; I will mention one example. The city of Munich adopted the IHRA definition at an early stage and it also has a significant Jewish population. When Klaus Ried – a citizen of Munich – booked a room in a museum in Munich for an event by the BDS, the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement for freedom, justice and equality (see BDS 2005, 2015), his booking was denied and cancelled, and the event was not allowed to take place by responsible decision-makers of the city of Munich. Nevertheless, Klaus Ried went to a German court and won the case in a decision of 2020,

about two years later, and Munich was not allowed to ban events of the so-called BDS movement thenceforth (Weinthal 2018). The BDS movement is strong in Germany and critical of the governmental solidarity with the State of Israel in Germany. The BDS movement claims that many German governmental institutions as well as entities use the IHRA definition in Germany to silence all voices critical of Israel, including BDS itself. These kinds of incidents are the core reason why the group of scholars and experts felt the need to create and sign the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism in May 2021. It also highlights the discourses that have emerged on general definitions of antisemitism that seek to function as preventative and combatting working tools against antisemitism. This is addressed in later sections of this review article, especially in the material

I am quoting (Brenner 2021; Antisemitism on the ground 2022; Defining antisemitism 2021).

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, May 2021

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) is 'a tool to identify, confront and raise awareness about antisemitism as it manifests in countries around the world today', as its website states in the lead-in to the preamble (JDA 2021). The following sentence in the pre-preamble is also important:

It was developed by a group of scholars in the fields of Holocaust history, Jewish studies, and Middle East studies to meet what has become a growing challenge: providing clear guidance to identify and fight antisemitism while protecting free expression. Initially signed by 210 scholars, it has now around 350 signatories. (JDA 2021)

The second half of the last sentence needs emphasising: 'while protecting free expression' (JDA 2021). If the JDA is a reply to the IHRA definition on antisemitism, drafted five years earlier, as Cheema Saba-Nur states in the online event of the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BPB) called 'Antisemitismus – definitiv!' (Brenner 2021), is it then insinuating that the IHRA definition does not support free expression in the same way as the JDA does? In fact, it raises the obvious question of whether both definitions (as well as the Nexus Document mentioned above) are about defining antisemitism *per se* or if they rather offer different approaches to what counts as antisemitism and what not. Thus, the JDA also has fifteen guidelines divided into sub-themes clarifying what antisemitism is and what it is not. But first to the major core definition of the JDA, which

differs drastically from the IHRA definition: 'Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish)' (JDA 2021).

One can observe here that the whole definition is so to say much more Jewish than the IHRA, leaving out the possibility that hate speech and hate crimes can target also non-Jewish persons and still be antisemitic. This possibility is removed by the core definition of the JDA. This is interesting in light of a news article from May 2021, which reports that on Tel Aviv University's website, Dr Giovanni Quer – conductor of a study on antisemitism within the Kantor Center of the Tel Aviv University – confirms that the rise in hate speech and crimes targeting Jewish as well as non-Jewish individuals and institutions is consistent with the IHRA definition (see TAU 2021).

However, before discussing the preamble itself, I introduce the three subthemes of the fifteen guidelines for the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, which sets a political tone in the discussion of definitions as preventative and combatting working tools against antisemitism. The homepage of the JDA guidelines, under the points 'A. General', 'B. Israel and Palestine: examples that, on the fact of it, are antisemitic' and 'C. Israel and Palestine', gives examples that, in fact, are not antisemitic (JDA 2021).

Let us therefore note two pertinent differences between the IHRA definition and the JDA: while the JDA says that only Jewish individuals and institutions can be the targets of antisemitism, the IHRA allows for associated non-Jewish individuals and institutions to become victims of antisemitic hate speech and crime as well. Also, while the IHRA definition concentrates in its examples on what antisemitism *is*, the JDA adds five guidelines focusing on what *is not* antisemitic in reference to Israel and Palestine.

As pointed out already, there is no dissent between the two definitions of what antisemitism is. Rather, in my opinion, there is disagreement about the framework within which to express facts about antisemitism, especially as related to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Therefore, let us consider what the JDA adds to the IHRA definition to enable us to understand it as a reply or update after five years of supremacy on the part of the IHRA definition.¹ With this in mind, I focus on the five guidelines under section C on the homepage of the JDA that deal with what *is not* antisemitism in relationship to Israel and Palestine:

- ‘Supporting the Palestinian demand for justice and the full grant of their political, national, civil and human rights, as encapsulated in international law’ (C11);
- ‘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. It is not antisemitic to support arrangements that accord full equality to all inhabitants “between the river and the sea,” whether in two states, a binational state, unitary democratic state, federal state, or in whatever form’ (C12);

1 On 3 November 2022, a group of 128 scholars, who were among the original signatories of the Jerusalem Declaration, published an open letter where they expressed their concern that Israel’s UN ambassador, Gilad Erdan, wanted to push the UN to adopt the non-legally binding working definition on antisemitism by the IHRA. Under the title ‘Don’t trap the United Nations in a vague and weaponized definition on antisemitism’ they published a specific intervention letter to the UN. The publication date of this article and the timing of the open letter to the UN unfortunately does not allow a deeper discussion of this document (see EUobserver 2022).

- ‘Evidence-based criticism of Israel as a state. This includes its institutions and founding principles. It also includes its policies and practices, domestic and abroad, such as the conduct of Israel in the West Bank and Gaza, the role Israel plays in the region, or any other way in which, as a state, it influences events in the world. It is not antisemitic to point out systematic racial discrimination. In general, the same norms of debate that apply to other states and to other conflicts over national self-determination apply in the case of Israel and Palestine. Thus, even if contentious, it is not antisemitic, in and of itself, to compare Israel with other historical cases, including settler-colonialism or apartheid’ (C13);
- ‘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’ (C14);
- ‘Political speech does not have to be measured, proportional, tempered, or reasonable to be protected under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and other human rights instruments. Criticism that some may see as excessive or contentious, or as reflecting a “double standard,” is not, in and of itself, antisemitic. In general, the line between antisemitic and non-antisemitic speech is different from the line between unreasonable and reasonable speech’ (C15) (JDA 2021).

Some problematic sections of this part C of the JDA guidelines are worth noting. As for guideline 12, the expression ‘from the river to the sea’ (JDA 2021) has given rise to heated discussions between supporters of the JDA and of the IHRA definition. Thus

Saba-Nur Cheema, in a panel discussion with the BPB, pointed out that while trying to avoid a fast political usage of the IHRA definition, the JDA provides room for difficult discussions. This pertains especially to guidelines 11–15, which concentrate on what is not *per se* an antisemitic statement, but according to Cheema, they actually leave space for misinterpretation in the JDA as well (Brenner 2021); she had in mind the expression ‘from the river to the sea’, but admits that she had only heard it in the expression ‘from the river to the sea Palestine will be free’ (Brenner 2021).

Furthermore, it could be considered bold of the JDA to state, in guideline 13, that criticism of the modern state of Israel may include criticism of its founding principles, and to use the term ‘Apartheid’ in the context of Israel as a given fact in this very guideline. These words and expressions are very sensitive in the current debates, and some people, such as the advocate and ex-Knesset-member Michal Cotler-Wunsh, would argue that the founding principles of the modern State of Israel had to do with the Shoah in Europe and the antisemitic persecution and destruction of the Jewish people (see Antisemitism on the ground 2022).

As regards support for the BDS movement in guideline 14 of the JDA document, in Saba-Nur Cheema’s view the JDA can be criticised for not reflecting the fact that, even if, as the JDA may claim, the BDS movement is not *per se* antisemitic, nonetheless some engaged in this movement have an antisemitic agenda, and for giving the whole BDS movement what is described as a ‘Persilschein’ in German (see Brenner 2021).²

2 ‘Persil’ is a very popular brand of washing powder in Germany, claiming to be effective in making dirty laundry white like new laundry. Therefore the German expression

Guideline 15’s ‘double standard in itself’ connected with ‘reasonable and unreasonable speech’ (JDA 2021) is, to my mind, confusing in terms of what is antisemitic and why these statements should not necessarily be considered as antisemitic. I would certainly seek a clarification on this guideline from the JDA.

Defining antisemitism in view of history and politics: an overview of the current discourse

From 30 May to 1 June 2022, I was privileged to have the opportunity to travel to the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem. Dr Dafna Schreiber (Head of the Department of Jewish Culture and Jewish Thinking) had put together an international workshop consisting of a group of scholars and interested parties to discuss the issue of defining antisemitism in view of history and politics. The workshop offered a deep insight into the actual and current discourse concerning the definition of antisemitism, which I summarise in this third section of the article.

In addition to my own notes from the seminar, I will use video recordings of some of the panels as well as a recording of a panel from an earlier event at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, dealing with defining antisemitism, chaired by Professor Vivian Liska (Defining Antisemitism 2021) from May 2021. More precisely, I will deal with the concluding panel of the first seminar, held on 31 May 2022, chaired by Professor David Feldman (Birkbeck College, University of London), and including the speakers Dr Seth Anziska (University College London), Saba-Nur Cheema (Frankfurt University), Professor Emeritus Moshe Zimmermann

‘Persilschein’ suggests that something was cleaned up and whitened and made shiny for a certain purpose.

(The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Michal Cotler-Wunsh.

This session started with significant friction over how to understand different definitions of antisemitism between the former legislator and member of the Knesset, Michal Cotler-Wunsh, and Moshe Zimmermann, who prior to this discussion had given an overview of the history of the expressions of antisemitism (see *Antisemitism on the ground 2022*). The opposing opinions circled around the founding of the modern State of Israel. In fact, Zimmermann claimed that we would not have such discussions over how to define antisemitism if this had not happened, and insinuated that, in general, the rise of antisemitism after 1942 could have been avoided if the modern State of Israel had not been founded. Cotler-Wunsh, on the other hand, stated ironically that this is an ‘interesting’ point of view considering that six million Jews perished in the Shoah (see *ibid.*). Already this small excerpt from the panel discussion that evening will give the reader a clear impression of the range of political affiliations and points of view represented at this international workshop on defining antisemitism in light of history and politics.

Cotler-Wunsh, furthermore, addressed Muslim–Israeli relations by explaining that there is a certain type of antisemitism that stems from anti-Zionism and/or anti-Israel rhetoric, as she herself wants to call it, and that this issue should be addressed (see *Antisemitism on the ground 2022*). She claimed that this is the real origin of contemporary antisemitism and for this reason, whenever something happens related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories, extensive violence and anti-Israeli demonstrations arise all over the globe (see *ibid.*). Furthermore, she wanted to make the audience aware of a huge online conspiracy campaign that started with the Covid-19

pandemic. This campaign used anti-Israel rhetoric, calling the pandemic Covid-48 with reference to the founding year of the modern State of Israel (see *ibid.*). This raises the topic of anti-antisemitism – a form of opposition to antisemitism – which is also a controversial and problematic issue. Interestingly Seth Anziska answered that this should be considered a context-related question and named examples from the UK and the United States (see *ibid.*). This notion of making things context-related recalls the three particular sections and the fifteen guidelines of the JDA, which dive deeply into context-related interpretations of what can be seen as antisemitic and not antisemitic. However, I cannot help but think: how can a definition function as a working tool to prevent and combat antisemitism if these questions are context-related? Does it not automatically imply a certain subjectivity in defining antisemitism? Should context-specific interpretations and subjectivity really be considered when talking about such a universal problem as antisemitism?

Saba-Nur Cheema underlined in the following part of the evening that there is in fact no dissent about what antisemitism is, but that the actual debate rather centres on anti-Zionism (see *Antisemitism on the ground 2022*). Cheema further emphasised that there has been a certain frustration because people thought the occupation of the Palestinian territories would be temporary. However, the occupation has turned out to be ongoing, and because the peace negotiations have basically come to an end between Israel and the Palestinian territories (see *ibid.*), this has stirred much anger. Moshe Zimmerman, for his part, reflected on the collective memory and the contemporary and urgent character of the debate on antisemitism. He said that the heat over antisemitism stems from the fact that it is relevant for societies to analyse why the Holocaust happened and antisemitism is

one of the explanatory models. According to Zimmerman, it also has to do with the way in which especially Israel and Germany deal with heritage and with their collective memory (see *ibid.*). Therefore, he claimed that the discussions on antisemitism are being instrumentalised and used for what we want in a society and what we do not (see *ibid.*).

At the end of the seminar, the discussion gradually moved towards the impact of social-media platforms on antisemitism. Cheema pointed out that discussions in schools and with pupils significantly changed as a result of social media, where, for example, videos of shootings of innocent people in Israel are widespread and the discussions automatically start to focus on anti-Zionism and anti-Israel rhetoric (see *Antisemitism on the ground 2022*). Cotler-Wunsh pointed out the example of Tik-Tok, a social-media platform mostly using video clips, which is in widespread use by youngsters and uses an algorithm to prohibit certain themes; this calls for a strong definition of antisemitism which is non-legally binding and adoptable by institutions and other bodies. Therefore, she supported the use of the IHRA definition and preferred it over the newer JDA (see *ibid.*). She tried to open the floor to discussions on which definitions we need, what their educational purpose is and how they can be used in a very practical way. However, the discussion of the evening ended with reflections concerning Israel's right to exist or not, which does not, unfortunately, take us any further into the matter of defining antisemitism. Therefore, I suggest adopting a more practical perspective in attempting both to clarify what is useful, and what form of language is suitable, in formulating criticism of the modern State of Israel, and to observe the actual use to which definitions such as the IHRA's or the JDA's can be put.

Professor Amos Morris-Reich made a

noteworthy point in the earlier seminar on defining antisemitism, in May 2021. From minute 46 in the video recording from the event, he suggests a more ambivalent position in criticism of Israel that reflects the history of the State of Israel and Zionism. Thus, he suggests that we need to be less ambiguous in approaching language that is recognisable from anti-Jewish history and the Holocaust (see *Defining antisemitism 2021*). Furthermore, he hoped that criticism of the State of Israel might reflect how Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel were part of an answer to the horrors of the Shoah in Europe and its aftermath (see *ibid.*). I believe, like Morris-Reich, that the key to a functioning criticism of the modern State of Israel that will actually be heard and taken seriously needs to reflect these dynamics. It is more important to focus on language that is not recognisable and not based on Nazi rhetoric and/or familiar from the context of the Shoah and therefore is only intended to damage and hurt. This could be more effective than acting according to grand definitions of antisemitism, which are less action-oriented and rather aim to fulfil an institutional and educational function.

A statement of expressing the essential statement of something: a conclusion

In the introduction to this article I asked the reader to keep the definition of the word 'definition' in mind. With that in mind, and recognising that readers have read this far, I would like to conclude by highlighting a definition of 'antisemitism' which is more action-oriented and well used by scholars all around the world.

The US-American historical sociologist and rights activist Helen Fein, who passed away in May 2022, and was the author of books such as *Genocide: A Sociological*

Perspective (1993), presented an inclusive definition of antisemitism in 1987, which has gained weight in overall research on antisemitism:

I propose to define antisemitism as a persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs toward *Jews as a collectivity* manifested in *individuals* as attitudes, and in *culture* as myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery, and in *actions* – social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against the Jews, and collective or state violence – which results in and/or is designed to distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews. (Fein 1987: 67)

This definition is attractive in that it reminds us of where we come from in antisemitism, and that there is no dissent about what antisemitism really is; it differs from definitions which are less action-based and have educational and institutional universal purposes to fulfil.

The aim of this article has been to give an overview of the two most influential definitions of antisemitism in Europe today, explaining where they come from, and to summarise the current debates and discourses on defining antisemitism in Europe. The Nexus Document was also mentioned as a third important definition; it plays a more important role in the United States. In conclusion, I presented Helen Fein's definition, which is more action-based, and Morris-Reich's statement of the importance of reflecting on language and the ability of language to hate and hurt (cf. Butler 1997). ■

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