

Joint letter of 56 scholars to Facebook: Don't adopt the "IHRA definition of antisemitism"

Facebook, Inc.
Attn. Board of Directors
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Concerns: campaign targeting Facebook to adopt "IHRA definition of antisemitism"

7 September 2020

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg, dear Ms. Sandberg, dear Board of Directors,

We, scholars specialized in antisemitism, Jewish and Holocaust history and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are writing to you with regard to Facebook's policy and efforts to ban antisemitic content from your platform, as part of your company's wider struggle against hate speech and bigotry.

We are deeply concerned about the rise in antisemitism around the world. Antisemitism and all other forms of racism and bigotry pose a serious threat that must be fought most forcefully. We commend Facebook's efforts in this regard and encourage you to intensify them.

While we do so, **we wish to issue a stark warning against adoption and application by Facebook of the definition of antisemitism used by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)**. You will be well aware you are currently the target of a coordinated public pressure campaign aimed at imposing this definition on Facebook.

On 7 August 2020, 128 organizations sent you an [open letter](#) urging Facebook "to fully adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism" and to implement a hate speech policy on antisemitism with that definition "at its core". They assert: "The full IHRA working definition of antisemitism provides Facebook an effective, neutral, and nuanced tool to protect Jewish users from hate speech and imagery that incites hate and oftentimes leads to violence."

The IHRA definition is no "effective, neutral, and nuanced tool" – certainly not if meant to encompass the "contemporary examples of antisemitism" attached to it. And this is what the signatories of the open letter mean and envisage, when they call on you "to fully adopt" the IHRA definition.

In fact, **the IHRA definition is highly problematic and controversial**. The two sentences representing the definition itself are unclear and indefinite, in particular the first one: "Antisemitism is *a certain* perception of Jews, *which may* be expressed as hatred toward Jews" (emphasis added). For this reason, the definition does not and cannot offer an effective instrument to fight antisemitism.

It is also not neutral nor nuanced. The aforementioned "contemporary examples of antisemitism" attached to it extend to criticism directed at the State of Israel and conflate such criticism with antisemitism. These examples are treated as an integral part of the definition.

Worse, the examples are being weaponized to attack, delegitimize and silence activists, experts, human rights defenders and civil society organizations criticizing the State of Israel and Zionism within the limits of freedom of speech. Such abuse has been condemned by leading scholars of antisemitism. Kenneth Stern, director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate, who drafted the

IHRA definition fifteen years ago, has also [denounced](#) the definition's use to undermine free speech.

Among the signatories of the open letter you received on 7 August are many organizations that have taken the lead in weaponizing the IHRA definition. They act in close coordination with the Israeli government, which they shield from international criticism, while it entrenches its occupation and moves towards formal annexation of Palestine.

These organizations have [asked](#) the Israeli Minister of Strategic Affairs to amplify their campaign targeting Facebook, also in view of the wider campaign the Israeli government has launched to influence social media platforms – which also relies on the IHRA definition. This testifies to the political agenda behind the campaign directed at you.

We reiterate our full support for your efforts to ban antisemitic content from Facebook and urge you to intensify them. These efforts will only succeed if your related policy is rooted in integrity and universality and will be perceived by your wider community of users as credible and sincere.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism doesn't meet these essential standards. **Adopting it would be a trap for your company and users. It would be used as a benchmark against Facebook, exposing you to ongoing and increasing pressures to remove content interpreted as violating the “contemporary examples of antisemitism” attached to the IHRA definition.**

Considering how the IHRA definition and its examples are being used in the public domain, this could have far-reaching implications for Facebook and for freedom of speech. Someone criticizing Israel in a way perceived as a double standard could then be accused of antisemitism under your corporate policy. Somebody embracing Antizionism and supporting a democratic one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, too. Or someone blaming Israel for institutionalized racism.

One can certainly disagree with these utterances. But such opinions are legitimate and protected by freedom of speech – apart from the fact they are also held by many Jews around the world. Suppressing such opinions doesn't boost the fight against antisemitism, but undermines it.

The [open letter](#) by the 128 organizations you received on 7 August was triggered by statements of your Director of Content Policy Stakeholder Engagement, Mr. Peter Stern, signalling Facebook has so far resisted adopting the IHRA definition because the definition recognizes that modern manifestations of antisemitism relate to Israel. We commend you for this choice and urge you to stick to it.

Fight all forms of hate speech on Facebook. But don't do so by adopting and applying a politicized definition of antisemitism, which has been weaponized to undermine free speech, in order to shield the Israeli government and to silence Palestinian voices and their supporters.

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