

1,200 Jewish professors call on Senate to reject controversial antisemitism definition

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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People carrying signs during a Unity March against antisemitism in San Francisco in March. (Photo by Levi Meir Clancy/Creative Commons)

Some 1,200 Jewish university professors have signed a statement rejecting a controversial antisemitism definition that the US Senate is considering codifying in federal law.

The [Statement from Concerned Jewish Faculty Against Antisemitism](#) was delivered to key congressional leaders on Tuesday, including Senate Democrats, members of the House Committee on Education, and the Workforce as well as Biden's White House Liaison to the American Jewish community.

The Jewish professors' statement opposes any effort to enshrine into federal law the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#) definition of antisemitism, which they say conflates antisemitism with criticism of the state of Israel. Among the signers is Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Tribe, journalist and professor Peter Beinart, and Yale law and history professor Samuel Moyn.

The IHRA definition has come under immense criticism for stating that manifestations of antisemitism "might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity." It offers several examples, such as: "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."

The professors' statement reads: "Criticism of the state of Israel, the Israeli government, policies of the Israeli government, or Zionist ideology is not — in and of itself — antisemitic."

Earlier this month, in an effort to crack down on antisemitic speech on college campuses, the US House overwhelmingly passed the Antisemitism Awareness Act, which uses the controversial IHRA definition. Senate leaders in both parties are now weighing whether it has enough backing to come to a vote in their chamber.

Meanwhile, as many as 40 states have either enshrined the controversial definition into state law or adopted it by resolution. Across the world, 35 countries have adopted it.

The professors say that in an attempt to silence criticism of Israel, the act would violate free speech, trample over academic freedom, and undermine Jewish safety.

"Our unifying opposition to this bill helps to surface what might actually be a silent majority of Jewish faculty and students on university campuses who have for the past six months been rather quiet, but are now taking a concerted stand against this bill in particular, but also the broader weaponization of antisemitism," said Jonathan Feingold, a law professor at Boston University's School of Law and one of the leaders behind the statement.

Feingold, who has been tracking laws passed by Republican-dominated state governments that make it unlawful to discuss racism, sexual orientation, or the full history of the United States, sees the Antisemitism Awareness Act as part of a larger attack on academic freedom, First Amendment rights, and diversity and inclusion

initiatives.

“The same politicians and right-wing activists who are rhetorically centering antisemitism as a sensible concern are at the same time actively undermining the civil rights infrastructure within our universities,” he said.

Those attacks on civil society and free speech include the aggressive police crackdown on campus encampments in the past month, the arrests and suspensions of Jewish students and other activists, and the cancellation of graduation ceremonies.

“I don’t know of a single instance where it has been used against White supremacists who are making racist claims about Jews,” said Barry Trachtenberg, a professor of Jewish history at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, referring to IHRA laws. “But it’s almost exclusively been used as a means by which to stop Palestinians from speaking about their experience under Israeli rule and for allies of Palestinians to address Israeli human rights abuses.”

Trachtenberg was part of a group of scholars who drafted an alternative definition of antisemitism presented in 2021 called the [Jerusalem Declaration](#). That declaration recognizes that antisemitism and anti-Zionism are “categorically different.”

It further states, “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.”

The 1,200 Jewish professors in their statement explicitly refer to this and another definition, the [Nexus Document](#), as better alternatives.

“By stifling criticism of Israel, the IHRA definition hardens the dangerous notion that Jewish identity is inextricably linked to every decision of Israel’s government,” the professors’ statement says. “Far from combating antisemitism, this dynamic promises to amplify the real threats Jewish Americans already face.” —Religion News Service