

**Independent  
Jewish Voices**  
Canada



**Voix juives  
indépendantes**  
Canada

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**Submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights Re:  
Study of Antisemitism**

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Canada.

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## Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights Re: Study of Antisemitism

Dr. Sheryl Nestel on behalf of Independent Jewish Voices Canada

My name is Dr. Sheryl Nestel. I am a retired sociologist and Affiliated Scholar at New College at the University of Toronto. I am a long time member and leader of Independent Jewish Voices Canada. [Independent Jewish Voices Canada](#) (IJV) is a grassroots organization with 23 chapters across Canada which is grounded in Jewish tradition that opposes all forms of racism and advocates for justice and peace for all in Israel-Palestine. Since October 2023, our membership has grown by more than a third which indicates widespread support for Palestinian rights within Jewish communities across Canada. I have taught, studied and written about antisemitism for more than 25 years. I was among the group of scholars that helped develop the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#) as a challenge and alternative to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition on Antisemitism. I have a lifelong involvement in Jewish life including educating my children in Jewish day schools. I hold Israeli as well as Canadian citizenship and lived in Israel for 15 years.

My purpose in submitting this brief is to bring forward evidence that Jewish opinion has long been divided on how to define antisemitism and on whether strong criticism of Israel correlates with hatred toward Jews. In its deliberations, this Committee must take into account Jewish perspectives that are in disagreement with the near unconditional support of Israel demonstrated by unelected communal groups who spuriously claim to speak for all Jews. To do otherwise would be undemocratic, shortsighted, and a deliberate attempt at censoring Jewish voices, particularly in this moment when tens of thousands of Jews worldwide have loudly and publicly condemned Israel's devastating war on Gaza. Claims that any ethnic or religious group speaks in one voice is the very definition of bigotry and intolerance. It is important to note that groups like the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) are not democratically elected by members of the Jewish community but are self-appointed from the ranks of elite community members. As Carleton University journalism professor Andrew Cohen commented in the Globe and Mail, "Today no one believes CIJA speaks for Canadian Jewry. It is not a parliament. Its officers are unelected. Its annual budget is secret. It is evasive."<sup>1</sup>

It is also my intention to challenge the notion that strong criticism of Israel is equivalent to antisemitism. This belief has already been used to justify restrictions of freedom of speech and academic freedom in North America and Europe compromising some of the most basic human rights promised in liberal democratic societies. We must not enact such restrictions here in Canada in the mistaken belief that they will somehow protect Jews. Despite evidence of reprehensible antisemitic behaviour on the part of some members of the Canadian public, new academic research definitively shows very little correlation between antisemitic views and animosity towards Israel among Canadians.

I would like to introduce the following points to the committee studying antisemitism:

- **Statistical reports on levels of antisemitism should be interpreted with caution.**

While evidence that antisemitism is a significant threat is indisputable, statistical reports on antisemitism which equate Jew hatred with criticism of Israel exaggerate this threat. Attempts to rank marginalized groups according to reported incidents of hate crimes are likely inaccurate given that marginalized groups consistently under-report hate crimes to police and other authorities. Reports on hate crimes or incidents of antisemitism frequently mis-attribute the growth of antisemitism to the movement for Palestinian human rights. There are serious criticisms that can be leveled, for example, against the widely-cited B'nai Brith Annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents and against B'nai Brith's specific claims about antisemitism in Canada. Chief among these are: inclusion of expressions of criticism of Israel as incidents of antisemitism; complete lack of methodological transparency; obfuscation of evidence of low levels of antisemitic sentiment

among the Canadian public; and disregard of evidence of the attitudes about antisemitism of Canadian Jews themselves.<sup>2</sup> Similar critiques have been articulated about the antisemitism statistics published by Jewish organizations in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> Professor Robert Brym, noted University of Toronto sociologist and one of the leading scholars of contemporary Canadian Jewish life, concludes that the recent reported rise in incidents by B'nai Brith can probably be attributed to some degree to the conflation of "antisemitic and anti-Israel acts."<sup>4</sup>

- **There is no Jewish consensus on Israeli policies. To claim otherwise is false and disingenuous.**

Canadian Jews, like Jews worldwide, hold various and often conflicting opinions about Israel and the limitations of criticism of the Jewish state. Thirty-one percent of Canadian Jews with an opinion on the subject polled in March 2023 felt that legacy Jewish organizations need to be more critical of Israel<sup>5</sup>. In a study published in March 2024, 28% of Canadian Jews surveyed found Israel's response to the Hamas attack to be "excessive"<sup>6</sup>. 54% of Canadian Jews oppose expanding Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank. 58% believe that the Canadian government should not meet with extremist Israeli government ministers. These attitudes are not shared by most pro-Israel Canadian Jewish institutions.

- **Claims that opposition to political Zionism, including anti-Zionism, is equivalent to antisemitism are not substantiated by recent academic research in Canada.**

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, a document endorsed by 350 of the world's most respected Holocaust and Jewish Studies scholars, has deemed that the following action is not antisemitic:

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.<sup>7</sup>

In a study conducted in February 2024, University of Toronto Professor Robert Brym concluded that "negative attitudes toward Israel are more widespread than negative attitudes toward Jews among all segments of Canada's non-Jewish population" thus disproving the argument that Canadian critics of Israel necessarily harbour antisemitic sentiment.<sup>8</sup>

- **There is very little empirical evidence that demonstrates conclusively that Jewish students are indeed unsafe on Canadian campuses. There is, however, significant evidence that pro-Palestine students and faculty are under threat.**

Absent definitive empirical evidence, many pro-Israel Jewish organizations make claims that Jewish students are under threat on Canadian campuses. However, substantial empirical evidence shows that many students and faculty in Canada have faced threats, intimidation, harassment and disciplinary measures initiated by Jewish on- and off-campus organizations, creating what has been described as a "chilly climate" for political and academic expressions of support for Palestinian human rights. In a 2022 survey of 77 pro-Palestine faculty and students from 21 Canadian universities, respondents reported serious violations of academic freedom, including political intervention into hiring decisions, pressure to self-censor in relation to writing or speaking about Palestine, harassment, surveillance and litigation by pro-Israel advocacy groups and media outlets, attacks from academic colleagues, and threats and harassment related to ethnic, racial or sexual identity.<sup>9</sup> Academics surveyed reported encountering Islamophobia and/or anti-Palestinian racism<sup>10</sup> from colleagues, students, and at campus events and protests. Academics who had contractual appointments or were as yet untenured felt particularly vulnerable. Numerous respondents indicated they had suffered significantly from the emotional

stress of working in a hostile environment. The experiences of these Canadians have been completely overlooked.

- **The International Holocaust Remembrance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA) is a highly flawed document and should not be imposed on Canadian universities.**

Despite claims to the contrary, the IHRA WDA is not a universally-accepted definition of antisemitism. It has been vigorously opposed by leading Jewish academics, including some of the world's most respected scholars of antisemitism, the Holocaust and Jewish studies and even by the definition's lead author himself.<sup>11</sup>

We unconditionally oppose the imposition of the IHRA on universities. Mandating the adoption of the highly controversial IHRA on university campuses as a means to address allegations of antisemitism will only exacerbate tensions and unleash opposition from students and faculty who correctly view the document as an attack on academic freedom and freedom of expression. Though we recognise that education is governed provincially, we urge the federal government to demonstrate leadership in democratic and academic life by acknowledging that academic freedom of expression in support of Palestinians, human rights organizations, and food aid organizations such as the World Central Kitchen are not antisemitic because they are critical of Israeli policies of dispossession, violence, and restricting aid during a growing famine in Gaza.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers, representing 75,000 Canadian academics, has unanimously rejected any implementation of the IHRA and more than 40 Canadian faculty associations have passed motions rejecting the IHRA WDA. 700 Canadian academics<sup>12</sup> and over 200 Canadian Jewish academics<sup>13</sup> have signed petitions opposing the IHRA. Despite claims by its supporters that it is not an impediment to free speech, the IHRA WDA has indeed been used to censor speech critical of Israel both in Canada and around the world.<sup>14</sup> There are more than fifty examples of how the IHRA has been used to silence critics of Israel in the U.S., the UK, Germany and the Netherlands.

Importantly, many major Jewish groups have rejected the IHRA WDA including: The New Israel Fund, J Street, Reconstructionist Judaism, Americans for Peace Now and the rabbinical human rights group T'RUAH. According to David Feldman, Director of the Institute for the Study of Antisemitism at Birkbeck College in the UK, 'the greatest flaw of the IHRA definition is its failure to make any ethical and political connections between the struggle against antisemitism and other sorts of prejudice'.

## **Summary**

Jewish opinion in Canada is diverse and that diversity deserves to be heard by our representatives in government. Any claim that Canadian Jews hold a single opinion on antisemitism or Israel must be viewed with skepticism. We reject the claim that strong criticism of Israel or even opposition to political Zionism is a form of antisemitism. Recent research shows that most Canadians who are critical of Israel do not hold negative views of Jews. We recommend that the Committee view statistical reports on antisemitism with a critical lens inasmuch as the conflation of anti-Zionist views and antisemitism can lead to exaggerated claims about the extent of antisemitism in Canadian society. Claims that Canadian universities are "hotbeds of antisemitism" need to be examined in light of the paucity of empirical evidence to that effect as well as in light of disturbing research which indicates that pro-Palestine faculty and students face significant intimidation, harassment and silencing. Finally, we strongly urge the Committee to reject any attempt to impose the framework of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism on Canadian campuses, a move which would imperil academic freedom and ignite significant opposition.

**Independent Jewish Voices Canada** (IJV) is a grassroots organization grounded in Jewish tradition that opposes all forms of racism and advocates for justice and peace for all in Israel-Palestine. IJV has 23 active chapters in cities and on university campuses across the country.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Cohen, “The unspeakable silence of the Canadian Jewish establishment”, *The Globe and Mail*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-unspeakable-silence-of-the-canadian-jewish-establishment/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sheryl Nestel and Rowan Gaudet, *Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada*. Independent Jewish Voices, October 12, 2022, <https://www.ijvcanada.org/unveilingthechillyclimate/>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Mari Cohen, “The Numbers Game”, *Jewish Currents*, April 28, 2020, <https://jewishcurrents.org/the-numbers-game>. Also, Laura E. Adkins, “How to Lie with Statistics, Antisemitism Edition”, *Forward*, Oct. 27, 2021, <https://forward.com/opinion/477225/ajc-survey-antisemitism-anti-zionism-islamophobia/>

<sup>4</sup> Robert Brym, “Antisemitic and Anti-Israel Actions and Attitudes in Canada and Internationally: A Research Agenda”, *Patterns of Prejudice* 53.4, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Jspace Canada and the New Israel Fund, “United in Opposition: Canadian Jews Oppose Policies Proposed by the Israeli Government, Survey Results, March 6, 2023, [https://www.jspacecanada.ca/united\\_in\\_opposition](https://www.jspacecanada.ca/united_in_opposition).

<sup>6</sup> Brym, R. (2024). “Jews and Israel 2024: A Survey of Canadian Attitudes and Jewish Perceptions”. *Canadian Jewish Studies Études Juives Canadiennes*, 37. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40368>.

<sup>7</sup> Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/> .

<sup>8</sup> Brym, R. (2024). “Jews and Israel 2024: A Survey of Canadian Attitudes and Jewish Perceptions”. *Canadian Jewish Studies Études Juives Canadiennes*, 37. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40368>. See also, Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism.

<sup>9</sup> See Sheryl Nestel and Rowan Gaudet, *Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada*. Independent Jewish Voices, October 12, 2022

<sup>10</sup> For a definition of Anti-Palestinian racism see “Anti-Palestinian Racism: Naming, Framing and Manifestations”, Arab Canadian Lawyers Association, April 24, 2022, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61db30d12e169a5c45950345/t/627dcf83fa17ad41ff217964/1652412292220/Anti-Palestinian+Racism-+Naming%2C+Framing+and+Manifestations.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Stern, “I Drafted the Definition of Antisemitism, Right Wing Jews are Weaponizing It”, *The Guardian*, Dec. 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect...>

<sup>12</sup> Open Letter from 650+ Canadian Academics Opposing the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism, Independent Jewish Voices, February 27, 2020 <https://www.ijvcanada.org/open-letter-from-canadian-academics-opposing-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jewish Faculty Against IHRA, Jewish Faculty Network, Spring 2021 <https://jewishfaculty.ca/jewish-faculty-against-the-ihra-defn/>.

<sup>14</sup> See “Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in UK Higher Education: The Adverse Impact of the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism” European Legal Support Centre and British Society for Middle Eastern Studies , September, 2023 <https://elsc.support/resources/academic-freedom-and-freedom-of-speech-in-uk-higher-education-the-adverse-impact-of-the-ihra-definition-of-antisemitism>.