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## The Mossad roots of the bogus IHRA anti-Semitism definition

[Ali Abunimah](#) [Lobby Watch](#) 8 June 2023



Katharina von Schnurbein, the EU's coordinator for combating anti-Semitism, has lied when confronted with concerns about how the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism is used to censor, smear and punish supporters of Palestinian rights.

John Macdougall/AP Images

The controversial definition of anti-Semitism adopted by the European Union and dozens of countries, local governments and institutions within the bloc has led to “widespread restrictions of the right of assembly and freedom of expression.”

That's one of the sobering findings of a [new report](#) from the European Legal Support Center (ELSC), an organization that defends Palestinian rights advocates from pervasive censorship.

The report also draws attention to how the effort to redefine criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism – which eventually culminated in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism – was originally funded by Mossad, Israel's notorious global spying and assassination agency.

The report documents 53 cases in Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom, and concludes that in the “overwhelming majority of cases” allegations of anti-Semitism that have been made using the IHRA definition, were false.

Among the cases, 42 involved allegations against people of color – 19 of them Palestinians – and 11 related to accusations of anti-Semitism against Jewish individuals or groups which had expressed sympathy with Palestinians.

This pattern indicates that the definition is being implemented in a “discriminatory manner,” according to ELSC.

Through its government ministries and embassies, Israel has been a “driving force behind the weaponization of the IHRA” definition, ELSC states.

**“Surveillance”**

Most challenges ultimately proved that the allegations of anti-Semitism were unsubstantiated, but often at high cost to those accused, including litigation, reputational damage, loss of employment and mental harm. Fear of such consequences acts as a major chill on free speech.

“I found that the IHRA definition was deployed as a distraction tactic, where routinely I felt burnt out defending the right to freedom of expression and solidarity with Palestine,” one student at a British university said. “I had crippling anxiety of who I could even trust, as it felt like the IHRA definition was a mode of surveillance in my day-to-day life.”

Among the most notorious cases of repression using the IHRA definition has been German government broadcaster Deutsche Welle’s mass firing of Arab journalists, based on bogus and politically biased accusations of anti-Semitism [leveled by pro-Israel advocates](#).

Three of the dismissed journalists who went to court had their [firings overturned](#) as unlawful and unjustified, and a fourth case is still pending, according to ELSC.

But across Europe, “disciplinary proceedings against university students and staff, denial of use of public spaces, refusal of public funding, dismissal from employment and exclusion from public events and debates have targeted advocates of Palestinian rights, including many Jewish activists, with false allegations of anti-Semitism,” ELSC states.

“These actions are often initiated by organizations and individuals acting in support of Israel.”

## De facto law

Despite widespread and growing criticism that the IHRA definition conflates criticism of Israel and its [racist state ideology Zionism](#), on the one hand, with anti-Jewish bigotry, on the other, the EU has aggressively urged member states to apply the document.

At the same time, the EU – and particularly anti-Semitism coordinator [Katharina von Schnurbein](#) – have ignored “substantive concerns” raised about the IHRA definition by civic organizations across Europe, ELSC says.

Instead, the European Commission – the EU’s executive body – has hidden behind the claim that “the IHRA definition is not legally binding,” while asserting falsely that the definition does not “limit freedom of expression or the possibility to criticize Israel.”

But ELSC’s meticulous research finds that across Europe, the IHRA definition “has become the basis for policies that are legally binding *de facto*.”

In the UK – which alongside Germany is one of the most repressive countries against supporters of Palestinian rights – “increasing governmental pressure,” including threats to withdraw funding, have compelled local councils, universities and even the National Union of Students, to adopt the IHRA definition.

“Consequently, the definition now forms part of internal investigations and disciplinary proceedings” in a manner that has “overwhelmingly impacted people who have criticized the Israeli government or advocated for BDS” – the boycott of Israel modeled on the international grassroots campaign that helped end apartheid in South Africa, ELSC states.

## EU anti-Semitism coordinator’s blatant lies

When confronted with concerns about the repressive use of the IHRA definition, the EU’s Katharina von Schnurbein has – [not for the first time](#) – resorted to lying.

Last November, [Francesca Albanese](#), the UN special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, asked von Schnurbein on Twitter if the EU had conducted an assessment on how use of the IHRA would impact [fundamental rights](#) such as freedom of expression and assembly.

Von Schnurbein responded that such an assessment had been made.

But the UK and Sweden-based human rights group [Law for Palestine](#) asked the EU to release the assessment under its freedom of information law.

Instead, the European Commission confirmed – flatly contradicting von Schnurbein – that no such assessment had ever been carried out.

While unconscionable, von Schnurbein’s behavior is hardly surprising: As The Electronic Intifada has [reported](#), the German official has for years worked closely with the Israel lobby in Brussels to implement its anti-Palestinian agenda.

## Pushed by the lobby

The controversial IHRA definition of anti-Semitism is only the latest iteration of efforts to redefine criticism of Israel as anti-Jewish bigotry.

It effectively recycles the [discredited](#) “working definition” of anti-Semitism published by the European Union’s Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (now the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency) in 2005.

That definition was originally written by Kenneth Stern, an official with the Israel lobby group the American Jewish Committee. Stern later [denounced](#) how the definition was weaponized to silence critics of Israel.

Stern’s definition never had official status, and was [withdrawn](#) by the EU body in 2013.

But after it was abandoned, advocates affiliated with Israel lobby groups including the American Jewish Committee, the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the European Jewish Congress, “lobbied other European bodies to adopt the definition,” according to ELSC.

When they had no success, they went to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which subsequently adopted the abandoned “working definition” and [added 11 illustrative examples](#) of “anti-Semitism” which mostly focus on criticism of Israel.

## Mossad money

The impressive sounding name of the IHRA – a body [made up of Israel and 34 other countries](#) – most of them Tel Aviv’s closest allies and weapons suppliers in Europe and North America – has been used to give the anti-Semitism definition a veneer of authority.

As such, it is the most successful result of a [decades-long effort](#) by Israel and its lobby to frame criticism of Israel and Zionism as the “new anti-Semitism.”

ELSC notes that the initiative to “capture and codify” this supposedly new anti-Semitism in a definition was initially championed by Dina Porat in her capacity as head of the Project on Antisemitism at Tel Aviv University, later [renamed](#) the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism.

Significantly, ELSC points out that the project headed by Porat “was funded by the Mossad.”

ELSC draws on the account of [Antony Lerman](#), the [founder](#) of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

In his 2022 book [\*Whatever Happened to Antisemitism?\*](#), Lerman calls Porat one of the “leading promoters of ‘new anti-Semitism,’ of the IHRA ‘working definition’ and of the infrastructure of ‘war’ against anti-Semitism.”

According to Lerman, Kenneth Stern was given the idea of writing his definition of anti-Semitism directly by Porat.

In the 1990s, Lerman led the Institute of Jewish Affairs, the research arm of the World Jewish Congress, which published a yearly country-by-country survey of anti-Semitism.

Lerman writes that as soon as the Institute for Jewish Affairs began publishing the annual anti-Semitism report, “there was intense pressure on the IJA to collaborate with a new, Mossad-funded Project for the Study of Antisemitism at Tel Aviv University in the production of a joint report.”

Lerman asserts that his organization tried to resist this pressure, “doubting the objectivity of this kind of Israeli involvement and concerned that the report could be used to further the state’s Zionist objectives.”

But other Israel lobby groups, including the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League, had no such qualms and eagerly teamed up with the Mossad-funded initiative.

Lerman reveals that the enmity he and his organization earned from the Mossad-backed project and its Israel lobby partners was linked to his group’s assessment in the mid-1990s that global anti-Semitism was actually *falling*. This was completely at odds with the notion of the “new anti-Semitism” being promoted by Israel and its lobby.

“In general, we found that the message that anti-Semitism was declining was not one that many people wanted to hear,” Lerman writes. “And since we were trying to raise funds for our work on the report, especially taking such a view did us no favors.”

“As we already knew only too well: to attract donors to support work on anti-Semitism, you were under strong pressure to exaggerate the problem,” Lerman adds.

As for Dina Porat who headed the Mossad-funded project at Tel Aviv University, she has been the chief historian at Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial since 2011.

While serving in that role, [she has been accused](#) of helping Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu whitewash Poland’s role in the Holocaust in order to smooth over relations with one of Tel Aviv’s staunchest EU allies.

Porat has evidently continued to play a role in Israel’s efforts to equate criticism of its crimes with anti-Jewish bigotry, though it is impossible to know to what extent if any she still collaborates with Mossad.

Last year she [stepped down](#) as the founding director of Tel Aviv University’s Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, although she continues to work there.

In 2019, Porat and the EU anti-Semitism coordinator Katharina von Schnurbein [shared the stage](#) with other European as well as Israeli government officials at a Tel Aviv University conference on the “rise of anti-Semitism,” where speakers aggressively promoted the IHRA definition and equated opposition to Zionism with bigotry against Jews.

## Pushing back

As the ELSC report demonstrates, the strongest motive to exaggerate and falsify claims of anti-Semitism – especially based on the grotesquely skewed IHRA definition – is to silence, smear and punish supporters of Palestinian rights.

It is a tool used not just by lobby groups but as a way for Israel to intervene directly in other countries’ affairs.

In 2017, for instance, the Israeli embassy in London pressured the University of Manchester over a planned talk by [Marika Sherwood](#), a Jewish historian and Holocaust survivor, titled “You’re doing to the Palestinians what the Nazis did to me.”

The embassy asserted that the talk would violate the IHRA definition, prompting university administrators to place [severe restrictions](#) on the event, including removing the chairperson and imposing their own, limiting publicity, forcing the title to be changed and informing students that the event would be recorded.

Despite the undoubtedly chilling effect the IHRA definition has had, its promoters are running into increasing resistance.

In April, more than 100 organizations [urged](#) United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres to reject pressure from Israel and its allies to adopt the IHRA definition.

And some advocates for Palestinian rights saw a victory in the Biden administration’s failure to adopt the IHRA definition as the sole reference for what constitutes anti-Jewish bias in its recently launched [strategy to combat](#)



[anti-Semitism](#). (The White House did however make clear that the US government has “embraced” the IHRA definition).

As for the European Legal and Support Center, it is urging the EU and other public authorities to revoke and to stop promoting the IHRA definition, to proactively protect freedom of speech and expression and to advance strategies to combat anti-Jewish bias that do not infringe on the rights and freedoms of advocates for Palestinian rights.

“In 2023, anyone who speaks or writes critically about Israel, risks facing public stigmatization and punitive measures based on false allegations of anti-Semitism,” ELSC observes.

That is the reality, but it will change as more people find the courage to speak up and to stand in solidarity with one another against the lies, smears and intimidation tactics of Israel and its lobby.

- [IHRA definition of anti-Semitism](#)
- [anti-semitism](#)
- [censorship](#)
- [European Legal Support Center \(ELSC\)](#)
- [United Kingdom](#)
- [Germany](#)
- [Austria](#)
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