

Report exposes fraudulent antisemitism accusations at UK universities

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A report has highlighted the anti-democratic impact of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)'s definition of antisemitism, which maliciously equates criticisms of Israel with anti-Jewish hate.

“The Adverse Impact of the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism” was co-authored by Palestinian legal advocacy group the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC) and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRSMES). It examines 40 antisemitism investigations in universities following accusations levelled under the IHRA. Not one has resulted in the accused being found at fault: 38 individuals or organisations have been cleared and two investigations are ongoing.

The report concludes that critics of the Israeli state, advocates for Palestinian rights and those teaching the history and politics of the region have been “subjected to false allegations of antisemitism” and that “those falsely accused have felt their reputations to have been sullied.”

Accusations “have had an adverse effect on academic freedom and freedom of speech on campuses, leading, in some cases, to the cancellation of events”. They have created a “a chilling effect among staff and students, deterring individuals from speaking about or organising events that discuss Palestinian human rights”.

The IHRA definition has been adopted by 119 universities (75 percent) following a relentless cross-party campaign covered previously by the *World Socialist Web Site*. We warned in October 2020 that then Education Secretary Gavin Williamson was “preparing for the censorship of hundreds of thousands of students and higher education staff” as “the latest move in a five-year conspiracy of the Conservative government, the Labour Party and Zionist organisations aimed at criminalising vast swathes of the political left.”

The ELSC-BRSMES report covers 24 cases involving staff members, nine involving students, and seven

involving student groups across 14 different universities—11 of them in the prestigious Russell Group.

Its authors note a “common feature across several cases is the occurrence of significant levels of monitoring and surveillance of any publicly expressed analysis or opinion about Israel or Palestine. This includes recording student speeches, staff lectures, and other presentations; monitoring student or staff social media posts (including the collection of social media posts several years after they were written); reviewing academic publications; and reviewing course syllabi and reading lists.”

In most cases, students or staff were made to suffer a prolonged period of official harassment and interference on the basis of false accusations. Seven students were put through disciplinary hearings lasting “several months, resulting in prolonged student stress and anxiety”.

A highlighted case saw one student investigated for two months for sharing a Human Rights Watch infographic about Israel's apartheid system in the West Bank, which they referred to entirely fairly as “ethnic cleansing...reminiscent of South African apartheid.”

Seven student societies had pro-Palestinian events or initiatives disrupted, with accusers focussing on Israeli Apartheid Week activities. Four events were fully cancelled by the university. Others had outrageous “vetting” conditions imposed, like requiring the organisers to declare their support for the IHRA definition in advance, to change the titles of their events, record them and refuse access to the public. Staff members were sent to monitor some events for IHRA compliance.

Dr. Somdeep Sen, Associate Professor at Roskilde University, felt forced to cancel a lecture on his book *Decolonizing Palestine: Hamas between the Anticolonial and the Postcolonial* at the University of Glasgow. The Jewish Students Society lodged a complaint claiming the topic was antisemitic, leading the university to demand Dr. Sen provide details of his talk in advance and promise

not to say anything that would contravene the IHRA. He refused to comply with these discriminatory conditions.

Eighteen staff members were investigated or given formal disciplinary hearings, all of which produced findings of “no case to answer” or “exonerated of all charges”. One was forced onto leave by stress and many “cited adverse consequences for their teaching preparation and research.”

This is political repression worthy of a dictatorship, carried out to safeguard the criminal Israeli state from criticism and cow its left-wing opponents.

But the report’s publication is another indication of a growing backlash against the campaign to enforce the IHRA. It notes, for example, the opinion of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, E. Tendayi Achiume, that the definition should not be used “owing to its susceptibility to being politically instrumentalised and the harm done to human rights resulting from such instrumentalization.”

Legal experts Hugh Tomlinson KC and Geoffrey Robertson KC, and the retired lord justices of appeal Sir Stephen Sedley and Sir Anthony Hooper have also been critical, with Robertson commenting pointedly, “The definition does not cover the most insidious forms of hostility to Jewish people and the looseness of the definition is liable to chill legitimate criticisms of the State of Israel and coverage of human rights abuses against Palestinians.”

The WSWS commented on the downplaying of far-right danger by the “left antisemitism” campaign last December.

In April this year, over 100 international and Israeli civil rights groups including B’Tselem, Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Watch wrote to the UN urging it not to adopt the IHRA, explaining: “Adoption of the definition by governments and institutions is often framed as an essential step in efforts to combat antisemitism. In practice, however, the IHRA definition has often been used to wrongly label criticism of Israel as antisemitic, and thus chill and sometimes suppress, non-violent protest, activism and speech critical of Israel and/or Zionism, including in the US and Europe.”

This response cannot be separated from events in Israel-Palestine, where the Netanyahu government’s warmongering and dictatorial aspirations, backed by his fascist coalition partners, are laying bare the character of the Israeli state and its oppression of the Palestinians. At

the same time, critics of the IHRA have doubtless been emboldened by the hundreds of thousands of Israelis protesting the government and visibly tearing apart the idea that the State of Israel represents all Jews for all time, or that opposition to it is inherently antisemitic.

But the widespread criticism of the IHRA raises fundamental questions. How did it become so entrenched in the first place, and how does the antisemitism witch-hunt continue to smear so many?

The answer is the bipartisan support lent by Britain’s main capitalist parties, and the politically criminal retreat orchestrated by former leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn. Accusations of left antisemitism and the IHRA came to prominence in Britain in a slanderous attack waged by the Labour and Conservative parties and the media on Corbyn and his supporters, designed to ruin his chances of election and set a chilling example to left-wing, anti-imperialist workers and youth.

Corbyn capitulated, allowing the accusations to fester and accepting and even facilitating the expulsion from the Labour Party of some of his closest allies. In September 2018, he accepted the IHRA definition in full. An extensive account of the witch-hunt and Corbyn’s role was published by the WSWS in April 2020.

The Conservative government and the Labour Party cannot be allowed to continue dictating political opinions to students and academics. Israel’s crimes cannot be shielded by a sham definition of antisemitism which terrorises opponents of dictatorship, oppression and war. The Jewish population in Israel and around the world cannot be falsely and dangerously equated with the right-wing ruling class in charge of the Israeli state.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality have fought consistently against this reactionary offensive in politics, academia and cultural life and call on all students and university workers to do the same.



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