

OPINION

Call me a self-hating Jew, but what Israel is doing in Gaza is indefensible



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Dear faithful supporters of Israel, Jewish and non-Jewish. And dear everyone else who may – or may not – know what to think about this diabolical conflict, but is loath to say so for fear of being labelled antisemitic or, in my case, a self-hating Jew.

Time to get clearer on what antisemitism means.

According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition, adopted in Bucharest in 2016, antisemitism includes the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology. It includes accusing Jews of “controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions”; or of denying the facts of the Holocaust.



A Palestinian woman mourns her son, killed in an Israeli airstrike in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip, on Wednesday. AP

It covers labelling Jews as “Christ killers”, or claiming they conspire to harm humanity; that they’re more loyal to Israel than other countries; that, regardless of political or religious leaning, they are collectively responsible for Israel’s conduct.

This IHRA definition has been officially adopted by more than 40 countries, including Australia, but has been criticised for its undue emphasis on Israel. Among its detractors are hundreds of leading scholars of Holocaust history, Jewish studies, antisemitism studies and Middle East studies who, in 2020, issued a competing definition known as the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#). (Many of the scholars are Jewish.)

This new definition was drafted because the IHRA definition was thought to muzzle legitimate debate about Israel/Palestine and Zionism; that it was better to remove the “state issue” from the question of antisemitism to help clear confusion and to combat real and growing antisemitism. (This Jerusalem Declaration has drawn strong criticism for being too soft on antisemitism.)



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. GRAPHIC BY MARIJA ERCEGOVAC/AP PHOTO

The IHRA definition insists that it is antisemitic to call Israel's existence a "racist endeavour", even though Israel has effectively built an apartheid system of domination over another people. (But are Jews a race, religious group, ethnicity, culture, people or nation? Discuss.)

The IHRA definition contends it is antisemitic to compare contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis, despite Israel being [accused](#) before the International Court of Justice of violating the Genocide Convention, a charge supported by a [growing number of countries](#), [human rights organisations](#) and the [United Nations Special Rapporteur](#) on the occupied Palestinian territories. (Israel rejects these accusations as "an obscene inversion of reality".)

Under the IHRA definition, it could be antisemitic for Daniel Blatman, head of the Institute for Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to say – as he did [recently](#): "I've studied the Holocaust for 40 years. I've read countless testimonies about the most horrific genocide of all, against the Jewish people and other victims. However, the reality in which I would read accounts about mass murder committed by the Jewish state (in Gaza) that, in chilling resemblance, remind me of testimonies from [the Holocaust] – this I could not have foreseen even in my worst nightmares."

Under the IHRA definition, no vehement critic of Israel is safe from the accusation of antisemitism – no student protester nor vice chancellor, no media boss nor journalist, no politician, institutional leader, artistic director, artist, colleague or friend.

The Jerusalem Declaration says that hostility to Israel can be an expression of "antisemitic *animus*", but it can also be a reaction to human rights violations, or "the emotion that a Palestinian feels on account of their experience at the hands of the Israeli state. In short, judgment and sensitivity are needed in applying these guidelines to concrete situations."

Here are some concrete situations: On October 7, 2023 Hamas and its affiliates massacred nearly 1200 people and took more than 250 people hostage. Fifty-eight hostages remain in Gaza, one-third believed still alive. This has traumatised Israel in the most profoundly shocking ways, as it would any nation.

Since October 7, Israel has – in what it claims to be “self-defence” and an attempt to destroy Hamas – killed nearly 53,000 people, including thousands of children, according to the [UN](#). Aid workers, first responders and journalists have been deliberately targeted, entire families wiped out, children bombed, shredded and decapitated. Almost all schools, homes, churches, mosques, hospitals, shelters and farmlands have been destroyed, and the majority of the territory’s 2 million people displaced countless times. Ethnic cleansing appears to be next.

Gaza is a wasteland where – since March 2 – no food, medical supplies nor fuel have been allowed to enter. People slaughter donkeys, horses and cats to survive.

“My name is Jori Al Areer, I’m 5 years old,” says a stick-thin girl to [the camera](#), her face a rictus grin of despair. “I am from Gaza. I am starving.”

United Nations experts have [described](#) this deliberate [starvation campaign](#) as an “ostentatious and merciless ... desecration of human life and dignity”.

Can I write that these scenes are reminiscent of Europe 80 years ago when my own people faced extinction? Under the IHRA definition of antisemitism, perhaps not.

Today, the fate of millions rests in the hands of an unchecked Israeli government, one that the (Jewish) *New York Times* Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Thomas Friedman wrote recently, “is not our ally”.

Time again to call this out, as hundreds of Jewish Australians (including myself) did in an open letter prior to the recent federal election. “For many of us, watching in horror, this is not a crisis we can turn away from,” the letter said. “It cuts to the heart of our Jewish values: the imperative to speak out in the face of injustice.

“Yet here in Australia, political leaders and commentators have worked to smear those who express solidarity with Palestinians. They claim that criticism of Israel amounts to antisemitism. They suggest that support for Palestinian rights – including from Australian political parties – is an attack on Jewish people.

“This is as false as it is dangerous. Not all Jews support the policies of the Israeli government or the actions of the Israeli army. We reject the idea that defending Palestinian life and dignity is antisemitic. On the contrary, it is an expression of our human and Jewish ethics. To imply otherwise erases the diversity within our community and exploits Jewish identity to shut down legitimate debate.”

As I said, it’s time to get clearer on what antisemitism is ... and is not.

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