

BRICUP Newsletter 111

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Universities of Palestine

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www.bricup.org.uk

bricup@bricup.org.uk

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UCU rejects New Definition of Antisemitism

Tom Hickey, University of Brighton UCU

At its annual Congress, held in Brighton in May of this year, the UCU overwhelmingly rejected a new definition of anti-Semitism that has been constructed and promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Motion

The UCU motion that rejected this definition as flawed was Motion 57 on the order paper, and came from the UCU branches at Leeds, Brighton and Goldsmiths. It observed that in confusing and conflating the concepts of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, the definition was both deeply flawed conceptually and legally, and was an obstacle in the fight against the resurgence of real antisemitism in the USA and across Europe and the UK.

Free Speech and Academic Freedom

The matter was of some considerable significance for academic and other staff in UK universities since the UK Government had adopted this definition of 'antisemitism' and urged Universities UK to advise all UK HE institutions that they should prevent meetings or events about Palestine that fall foul of the definition. In conflating criticism of Israel with anti-Jewish racism the definition constitutes a threat to open debate and free discussion about the future and past of the Middle East and Palestine.

This process has already commenced. Some universities have already complied with this instruction, and have banned campus events. Others have explicitly refused to adopt the

definition, and have resisted outside pressure from Israel's supporters to comply.

Fragile Legal Status

Now a senior QC has written an Opinion that describes the definition as confusing, with no legal significance, and relying on it to restrict freedom of expression has the potential to put universities and public bodies at risk. This Opinion (http://bricup.org.uk/documents/archive/BRICUP_Newsletter109.pdf) played a significant part in convincing delegates at the Congress to support Motion 57.

Origin of the Flawed Definition

In 2011, UCU Congress passed a motion with an overwhelming vote dissociating the union from the 'Working Definition of Antisemitism' of the EU Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC). The Working Definition deliberately conflated genuine antisemitism with criticism of Israel. In fact, despite its name, the definition did not originate from any EU organisation but from the American Jewish Committee, a self-confessed lobbying group for Israel. The EUMC never formally adopted the definition, and its successor body the Fundamental Rights Agency quietly dispensed with it.

Silencing Palestine

With sustained pressure from the Israel lobby, the EUMC working definition was reincarnated last year as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. In December, the IHRA was adopted by the Government. Pro-Israel groups have seized on this opening, and the London Assembly, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, several other local councils, and the National Union of Students have all followed suit. In February this year, Universities Minister Jo Johnson wrote to Universities UK insisting that university activities must respect the IHRA definition. In particular, "anti-Semitic incidents ... might take place under the banner of 'Israel (sic) Apartheid' events."

Banning meetings

Not surprisingly, the IHRA definition has been cited by some University authorities that have intervened to ban proposed activities during Israeli Apartheid Week this year. Others gave different reasons for their obstruction of pro-Palestine events, such as elements of the Prevent strategy, but were clearly responding to the signal from the Government.

The Tomlinson Legal Opinion

Reacting to this wave of censorship the new, Jewish-led organization, Free Speech on Israel, along with PSC, Independent Jewish Voices, and Jews for Justice for Palestinians, obtained a legal Opinion from the eminent human rights lawyer Hugh Tomlinson QC.

Unlawful censorship

This Opinion is devastating: it characterises the IHRA definition as confusing, not legally binding, and as putting public bodies that use it at risk of 'unlawfully restricting legitimate expressions of political opinion'. A public body that bans a meeting under the IHRA definition without any evidence of genuine antisemitism could be breaching the European Convention on Human Rights which guarantees freedom of expression (Article 10), and freedom of assembly (Article 11).

Anti-racism

The four bodies that commissioned the Opinion are deeply committed to anti-racism, including opposition to antisemitism. They view this definition as undermining the defences against antisemitism, by politicising the concept in an attempt to shield Israel from criticism. They are campaigning actively to inform public bodies round the country about the reality behind this shoddy manoeuvre.

The UCU Congress Debate

In moving the motion, Mark Abel (Brighton UCU) noted that, amongst other obstructive tactics elsewhere in the sector, an event organised by Friends of Palestine had been cancelled by UCLAN, whose management cited the IHRA definition as making the event 'unlawful'. He stressed that the definition is non-statutory, and so cannot be used to declare meetings or events to be unlawful but observed that knowledge of this fact had not yet spread widely.

Able argued that, despite being somewhat confusing and having been poorly drafted, the definition was, in itself, not contentious but the guidance notes on its interpretation, and the examples given contain a direct threat to academic freedom and to freedom of speech by suggesting that questioning the legitimacy of the Israeli state is a form of antisemitism. This is a dangerous conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Even the Home Office saw the danger of this but the Government ignored its advice.

The motion's wording was improved by friendly amendments from Queens Belfast UCU and from the London Retired Members Branch. There was only one speech against the motion, and when it went to the vote it was carried nem con by the hundreds of delegates, and with only approximately 5 abstentions.

Next Steps

Now that the UCU has reaffirmed its policy on opposing both antisemitism and all attempts to conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism, the task is to ensure that students and staff at universities are free to organise meetings on the history and politics of Palestine, and on the history of Israeli settler colonialism and the character of the Israeli state. UCU branches will be seeking to organise such meetings in the 2017-18 academic year, and anyone interested in helping to organise such events should contact Bricup via the website.

Substantive motion (as amended)

Congress notes:

1. UCU's exemplary anti-racist work, e.g. Holocaust Memorial Day materials;
2. policy (2011) dissociating UCU from the 'EUMC working definition' of anti-Semitism;
3. the close similarity between the IHRA and EUMC definitions, including their conflation of antisemitism with criticism of Israel;
4. that the Government has formally adopted the **IHRA definition of anti-semitism**;
5. that this definition conflates antisemitism with criticism of the state of Israel, and has been used to intimidate academics who are engaged in activities that are critical of the policies of the Israeli government but that are not anti-Semitic;
6. Government-inspired attempts to ban Palestine solidarity events, naming Israeli Apartheid Week;
7. the legal opinion from Hugh Tomlinson QC, obtained by PSC and other groups, characterising the IHRA definition as confusing, not legally binding, and putting public bodies that use it at risk of 'unlawfully restricting legitimate expressions of political opinion'.

Congress re-affirms:

1. UCU's condemnation of all forms of racial or religious hatred or discrimination
2. UCU's commitment to free speech and academic freedom
3. the importance of open campus debate on Israel/Palestine.
4. Congress resolves that UCU dissociates itself from the IHRA definition and will make no use

of it (e.g. in educating members or dealing with internal complaints).

Congress instructs:

1. NEC to contact all members in a dedicated communication urging report to NEC of all repressive uses of the IHRA definition;
2. conduct research about the implications of the use of the IHRA definition;
3. general secretary to write to VCs/principals urging staff protection from malicious accusations, and freedom of political criticism;
4. president to issue, and circulate to members, a detailed press statement on UCU's criticism of the IHRA definition;
5. lobby government to seek a review of its endorsement of the IHRA definition and to replace it with one that will both protect free speech and combat antisemitism.

Recalling the experience of Fraser vs UCU, we call upon the NEC to take a position against any university management that reacts to spurious accusations of antisemitism by banning speakers who are opposed to the policies of the state of Israel but who have not in any way expressed racism against Jewish people

Sumud and Sustainability in Bethlehem, Palestine

*Mazin Qumsiyeh - Founder and (volunteer)
Director of the Palestine Museum of Natural History and Palestine Institute of Biodiversity and Sustainability at Bethlehem University.
info@palestinenature.org*

Our dominant species Homo sapiens (the wise) may lead itself to extinction by either dramatic climate change or by nuclear weapon proliferation and war. There is some talk of what will become of our small planet after humanity or of even of colonizing new planets just in case we finish this one off. Less cynical forces work to remedy the situation via enhanced environmental education and environmental stewardship. Science and technological advances are indeed double edge swords which can be used for destruction or for building up sustainable communities (I am ambivalent about the term "sustainable development"). In developed countries with good economies, these discussions are advanced and people generally can afford to protect the environment more than in the case of under-developed or developing countries (Mills and Waite, 2009). Many nations are unable to advance their regulatory and enforcement standards to

protect their environment in an increasingly globalized system under difficult economic situations (Vogel, 1997).

While over 100 countries have lived through colonization and moved to a post-colonial period, Palestine remains the exception. Since the first Zionist colony established via the “Jewish Colonization Association”, the conflict has remained a major issue not just locally in Western Asia but globally because the Zionist project relied heavily on Western support. The situation today is sobering. There are 12.7 million Palestinians of whom 7.2 million are refugees or displaced people. In historic (mandatory) Palestine today there are 12.3 million people, 51% Palestinian (Christian and Muslim) and 49% Israeli (mostly Jewish). The latter population (most immigrants) uses 91.3% of the land leaving the former with only 8.7% of the land. To talk of research, development (sustainable or otherwise), and environmental conservation requires dealing with those facts. We at Bethlehem University work within these constraints to achieve our mission of service. We have centers of excellence in research for example in biotechnology. One of the new projects (started 2014) is the building of the Palestine Museum of Natural History (PMNH) and Palestine Institute of Biodiversity and Sustainability (PIBS).

PMNH/PIBS started through volunteer effort with a mission of research, education and conservation for our environment. Our two dozen scientific publications in two years publications cover areas from biodiversity to genotoxicity to museology to education to permaculture. The research acts as a prelude to education and we helped create environmental clubs in schools that focus on reducing waste, recycling, composting, and appreciation of our environment (e.g. bird watching). Some of our research papers are posted online at <https://www.palestinenature.org/research/>.

Research and education lead to conservation (environmental stewardship). But we also made use of land of about 12 dunums that we rehabilitated as an ecosystem. The untended olive and almond trees were rehabilitated but we also protected the natural areas of the garden and supplanted them with Palestinian native trees and shrubs brought from the only remaining habitat nearby in Bethlehem area in the area of Wadi Al-Makhrour and near Battir (UNESCO world heritage site). The district of Bethlehem is rapidly losing its biodiversity due to colonial Israeli activities, population growth, and poor

management of natural resources (Amr et al., 2016; Qumsiyeh et al., 2014). It is not too late though and we believe projects like ours can have a significant role to play in environmental conservation (Qumsiyeh et al., 2017). The garden also acts as a permaculture experimental center and is an oasis for fauna and flora in the urban area of Bethlehem. We established an aquatic system (“wetland”) that now has three species of amphibians, fish, dragon flies, and also attracts migrating birds. We even have a family of foxes that chose to live on the grounds protected from the many stray dogs in the neighborhood. We also rehabilitate and release injured animals including birds.

We are developing exhibits and working with schools and volunteers on our compost center and initiating medicinal and herbal gardens. We keep bees and we have three aquaponic systems in a green house. Our work is supplanted by dozens of local and international volunteers and we are beginning to apply and receive some external grant funding (we started only with local donations). We consider it a form of *sumud* (persistence, resilience) to create sustainability even under the difficult circumstances. We have plans for expanding our efforts and even a new museum building (made by Palestine Polytechnic University architecture students as their graduation seminar, photo inserts) and are seeking funding. For short videos and other information about our work, visit our website <http://palestinenature.org>

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Support Sumud and help save the First Drama School in Palestine from Closure-

A Message from Artists for Palestine UK

Those who saw Ramallah-based Ashtar Theatre's production of Richard II at the Globe in 2012 will long remember it. Now Ashtar is faced with financial crisis. The theatre needs to raise £40,000 to keep its premises open. It has launched an appeal for funds. Ashtar's reputation is global, and its work is aimed at creating international solidarities. Its 'Gaza Monologues' have brought the voices of Gaza's children to audiences across the world. It recently launched the 'Syrian Monologues' to draw attention to the Syrian refugee crisis and to 'fight the war machine that turns people to numbers and casualties'.

At home, in the midst of occupation, and the constant threat to free expression and free movement, Ashtar has battled to find a space for theatre. As well as its professional performances, it provides training for theatre workers and drama teachers. It works in the refugee camps; it works in the underfunded schools of the Palestinian Authority.

Artists for Palestine UK has launched an appeal to supporters to help keep Ashtar Theatre alive. Culture is one of the sources of Palestinian endurance. The loss of Ashtar would encourage those who seek to wear that endurance away. Please don't let this happen.

You can donate to the campaign to save Ashtar [here](#).

Artists for Palestine UK

<https://artistsforpalestine.org.uk/>

Zionism and Antisemitism . Birkbeck College, London, May 24th-26th.

Ghada Karmi.

A conference entitled, 'Zionism and Antisemitism', that promised to be timely given the recent debate about an alleged resurgence of

Antisemitism in Europe and the UK, took place at Birkbeck College in London on May 24-26. It was organised by the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism and included many British and international speakers. I was not able to attend all the sessions, but the topics the conference addressed were of considerable interest. There were sessions on Christianity and Zionism, socialism and Zionism, anti-Israeli attitudes and Antisemitism, the 'New Antisemitism', and one paper on antisemitism and BDS. These are all issues that are current to the debate about anti-Jewish attitudes and actions, and discussing them in an academic forum that allowed for a scholarly input into a controversial topic was highly appropriate.

However, it soon became clear that the Arab, and especially the Palestinian dimension- one would have thought to be relevant to a subject of this kind- was not to be a feature at the conference. In three days of discussion, there was only one Arab speaker, Bashir Bashir of the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem. Professor Gilbert Ashcar from the School of Oriental and African Studies would have been the other one, but had to pull out due to illness. Even had he participated, however, there would have been just two Arab speakers out of some 25 who were either Jewish or Jewish Israeli. The idea that the people most affected by Zionism did not merit a more prominent place at these deliberations was extraordinary. The Zionists, for whom the solution to Antisemitism lay only in the creation of an exclusive state for Jews, could never have succeeded without displacing the indigenous population of the land they chose for their enterprise. Any assessment of Antisemitism today could not be complete without that dimension.

If the conference had addressed the issue it would have heard that Arab attitudes to Jews were traditionally entirely different from those in Europe. Throughout the period of Islamic rule Jews had a status similar to that of Christians, as, 'People of the Book', that is, religious minorities whose faith was recognised by Islam. Aside from a period of persecution, (which they endured along with the Christians) by the 12th-century Almohad dynasty in Andalusian Spain, there were no pogroms, massacres or expulsions of Jews under the Muslims. These were entirely European phenomena. That tradition of tolerance continued until the creation of Israel in 1948 in the midst of the Arab world. Arab hostility to Jews stems from that event and was caused by it. Today, there are

many examples in the Arab world of the kind of anti-Semitic stereotyping so common in the West. Palestinian reactions to Jews as Israelis, must also be fitted into this framework.

I believe that the conference was impoverished by the omission of these aspects, which would have thrown light on how Antisemitism can arise in certain situations, that it is not an innate condition sui generis, and that Zionism led to its appearance in a part of the world where it had hardly existed before. There are important lessons in this. One can only hope that the Pears Institute will put this right at its future conferences.

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Free Speech on Campus!

Jonathan Rosenhead

Good news for once. Some kind of bulwark seems to have given way, and academic conferences with a critical edge and focussed on Israel/Palestine are flowing through.

This development has seemed highly unlikely ever since the [University of Southampton's cancellation](#) in 2015 of the conference on International Law and the State of Israel. That conference, organised by two of the University's Professors, one Palestinian and one Israeli, had the rug pulled from under it a matter of weeks before it was due to take place. It had been the centre of petitions and threats of demonstrations from supporters of Israel, and of lobbying from the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council and the UK Zionist Federation. Heavyweight Conservative politicians such as Eric Pickles went public with accusations of antisemitism. In Michael Gove's opinion "It was not a conference, it was an anti-Israel hate-fest." Extraordinarily even the UK's Ambassador to Israel got involved in the orchestrated pressure.

That conference eventually did take place and very successfully – but two years later, and not in the UK but in Cork. (See the account in [BRICUP Newsletter 109](#).) In the UK itself prospects for the academic freedom to discuss and critically debate Palestine's predicament seemed to have worsened in the interim. In particular the UK government [adopted](#) the highly contentious IHRA 'definition' of antisemitism in December 2016, and then had it circulated to all UK universities. The definition highlights a range of criticisms of Israel as prima facie evidence of antisemitic intent. In his covering letter the Higher Education Minister Jo Johnson (sibling to Boris) pointed out its relevance to the impending annual Israeli

Apartheid Week. The chilling effect was immediate, with a slew of [obstructions](#) to student-organised meetings and installations.

Individual universities have also come under intense pressure in recent months from Zionist organisations to formally adopt the IHRA 'definition', with parents of Jewish students roped in for organised letter writing campaigns. So far as we are aware no university has yet done so; and Director of SOAS Lady Amos has explicitly ruled it out for the college she leads. Several non-university public bodies have however succumbed to this pressure – notably the Greater London Council and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

All of which makes the recent good news from our campuses more remarkable. First out was a 1-day conference at the start of May at the University of Warwick, on Palestine Today: The Six Day War at 50 and Balfour at 100. Its aim was to assess research gaps on the conflict, and explore possible futures for the West Bank in an interdisciplinary way. I wasn't at the conference, and the only report I have seen is a typically snide piece by an aggressively anti-Palestine blogger. However we do know that Jonathan Hoffman, a former office-holder of both the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the UK Zionist Federation, wrote to the University's Vice-Chancellor, invoking the official PREVENT programme and asking him to close down the conference on the grounds that it was racist. The university stood firm.

Only a week later the University of Sussex held a 3-day conference. Like that at Warwick, it was occasioned by this year of anniversaries – its title was The Occupation at 50: Pasts, Presents, Futures. Sponsored by a whole array of the university's research centres (the Centre for Human Rights Research, the Middle East and North Africa Centre, the Centre for Conflict and Security Research and the Rights and Justice Research Centre) it had a Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor as one of the early speakers: evidently this conference had rock solid internal support. And rather curiously the usual Zionist attack did not materialise – though at just the same time the University was being battered by demands (which so far it has resisted) to adopt the IHRA document on antisemitism.

Impressively well organised in a mixture of plenaries and parallel sessions, the conference featured presentations by Israeli and Palestinian academics as well as from a number of other

countries. It was noticeable, however, that Palestinian contributors were sparse, and had indeed thinned out since the programme was distributed; perhaps they had more difficulty in getting away. Skype contributions by Richard Falk and George Bisharat were particularly notable.

Still in the month of May there came a 3-day international conference on Zionism and Antisemitism, organised by Birkbeck's Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism. It could hardly be more timely. For the past 18 months antisemitism has been rising up the political agenda in this country, and indeed round the world). At times it has seemed able to dominate the domestic news agenda, despite being for decades one of the less prevalent forms of racism in the UK. The extent to which this is an engineered moral panic has been [discussed previously](#) in the BRICUP Newsletter and elsewhere.

The Birkbeck Institute is supported by the Pears Foundation which has been active in the seeding of Israel Studies posts and departments round the UK's universities. Pro-Israel opposition to the conference was therefore never going to be a problem. In consequence this conference was in principle an opportunity to achieve some much-needed conceptual clarification without the boring and boorish confrontations that have become so common wherever speakers supportive of Palestinian rights are billed to speak.

I couldn't stay for the whole conference, but in what I heard there was indeed a range of interesting papers dealing with different historical periods and country settings, about discussions among Jews and within Zionism, about Zionism and politics, Zionism and Socialism, racisms in general, the holocaust. There was however a double failure of balance. As at Sussex, there was a drastic shortage in Palestinian speakers (see Ghada Karmi's article in this Newsletter). But additionally, when it came to discussions of the current conjuncture in the UK and more widely, with its highly politicised stances on the salience and indeed the meaning of antisemitism, one side was largely absent.

Alan Johnson of Engage, Fathom and BICOM, David Hirsh of Engage and Goldsmiths College, Dave Rich of the Community Security Trust and author of what must be the worst book ever on antisemitism. This would have more than sufficed. But their contributions paled by comparison with the strident rant of Gerald

Steinberg and Anne Herzberg of the infamous NGO Monitor, which for 16 years has been spreading McCarthyite poison about organisations that they see as hostile to Israel. Despite the clear analytic remit of the conference they chose to engage in loud-mouthed polemic, over-run their allotted time, ignore the chair trying to restore discipline, and give arrogant and supercilious putdowns to questioners.

All of this was entirely predictable. So why were they on the programme? It is not over yet. Next week (as I write) there is a 2-day workshop, based in the International Relations Department at LSE, on Europe and the occupation of Palestinian territories since 1967. Michael Lynk the current UN Special Rapporteur for the occupied Palestinian territories is one of the speakers. With free expression on Israel/Palestine everywhere, could it be that UK universities have remembered that they have a backbone?

Israel's supporters threaten academic freedom at the University of Warwick

Nicola Pratt, University of Warwick

Supporters of Israel tried but failed to close down an academic conference on Palestine at the University of Warwick, held on 4 May. 'Palestine Today: The Six-Day War at 50 and Balfour at 100' was a one-day conference aiming to assess the legacies of these historical events, and to consider prospects for accountability and future possibilities in the struggle for Palestinian rights. The conference was organized by early career academics in the departments of Law, Sociology and Politics & International Studies and funded by the Faculty of Social Sciences. The speakers were academics, activists and practitioners, overwhelmingly early career researchers from other UK universities. Nimer Sultany of SOAS and Suhad Bishara of Adalah gave keynote addresses that spoke to the possibilities and limitations of both international and Israeli law as a tool of emancipation for Palestinians. The event was attended by Warwick students and staff as well as members of the local community and was deemed a great success.

A couple of days prior to the conference, the organizers were informed by the head of university security that the Vice Chancellor had received a request by an outside party to close

down the conference on the basis that it was not an academic event but an ‘Israel hatefest’. Indeed, Jonathan Hoffman, former member of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and former vice chair of the UK Zionist Federation posted to the conference’s Facebook Event Page: ‘In what way is this an academic conference? All the speakers as far as I can see are anti-Israel. The University is taxpayer-funded. How can an Israel Hatefest be a good use of public money? Not one Speaker will put Israel's perspective.’

<https://www.facebook.com/events/151076945424178/>

Fortunately, unlike in some other UK universities, the University of Warwick did not cave in to this external pressure and the event went ahead, albeit with two security officers posted on the door and one inside the conference room. This was somewhat unnerving for participants, who, understandably, did not expect a visible security presence at an academic conference. In the end, there were no attempts by anyone in the audience to disrupt the proceedings--although David Collier, who writes a polemical blog that claims to ‘challenge the revisionist narrative and expose lies and antisemitism’, did write a series of disingenuous articles, gratuitously attacking the conference and its organizers. Linking to Collier’s blog would help to improve its search engine ranking. Given the distortions and distressing nature of his writings, therefore, I do not include the web link for his blog. A critique of his writings by Jonathan Ofer can be found here:

<http://mondoweiss.net/2017/03/terrorist-movement-exposing/>

Even though Israel’s supporters were unsuccessful in closing down this conference, nevertheless, these assaults have negative effects on academic freedom for those who research and speak on Israel/Palestine. The effect, if not the intention, is to intimidate academics and make them think twice before criticising Israel. Early career researchers, most of whom do not yet have permanent positions are particularly vulnerable to such attacks, which also give the impression to university management and administration that talking about Israel/Palestine is a ‘high risk’ activity, requiring more scrutiny than other academic topics.

Specifically, this case demonstrates how the Prevent Duty is being used to try to intimidate universities to police discussion of Israel/Palestine. The outside party who requested that the University of Warwick close down the Palestine Today conference also submitted a Freedom of Information request for all documentation relevant to arranging the conference

including the risk assessment for ‘inciting extremism’ and arrangements made for speakers with alternative points of view. This language clearly echoes the obligations of Higher Education Institutions in England and Wales under the Prevent Duty.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445916/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_For_Higher_Education_England_Wales_.pdf

Whilst critics of Israel have rightly been alarmed by and opposed the government’s adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, because of its conflation of antisemitism with anti-zionism, this case demonstrates that the Prevent Duty, which is a statutory obligation for universities, represents probably a more dangerous weapon in the hands of Israel’s supporters.

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Far-right Islamophobes unite with pro-Israel lobbyists in European Parliament antisemitism debate

Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi

[A debate in the European Parliament on Wednesday](#) on May 31 exposed pro-Israel lobbyists as the natural allies of far-right Islamophobes supporting a definition of antisemitism designed to defend the state of Israel. Ostensibly about a motion on “Combating Antisemitism”, the discussion in fact revolved around one clause calling for institutions of the EU and all member states to adopt the controversial “[International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism](#).” This document, based on an earlier “working definition” abandoned by the now defunct EU monitoring centre on racism and xenophobia (EUMC), broadens the widely understood concept of antisemitism as hostility towards Jews, to include criticism of Israel. In Thursday’s vote, 101 MEPs voted against its inclusion in the motion, but 479 voted in favour while 47 abstained. The motion including the contentious clause was passed.

Speakers for the two largest political blocs, the Conservative European People’s Party and the Socialists & Democrats, praised the virtues of the document and insisted that it was essential in the fight against a wave of antisemitism that they said was sweeping the continent. Other forms of racism were barely mentioned during the debate.

Spanish Socialist Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar, one of the architects of the motion who has worked closely with Zionist lobbyists in his role as chair of the European Parliament working group on antisemitism, insisted that the IHRA clause was basically about hatred of Jews. It had nothing at all to do with legitimate criticism of the Israeli occupation or its settlements. Fellow social democrat, Péter Niedermüller from Hungary, was more honest, extolling the IHRA clause for making clear that “you cannot question the very being of the Israeli state.”

Islamophobes back the IHRA definition in European Parliament debate

Little doubt remained about the chilling implications of the document when it was defended by speaker after speaker from far right nationalist groups such as the UK Independence Party and Italy’s Northern League. UKIP’s Gerard Batten, already infamous for [calling Islam a “death cult”](#), urged MEPs to make sure the blame for antisemitism is placed where it belongs – at the door of Muslim immigrants. The outpouring of racist bile from supporters of the motion pledging their commitment to Israel while claiming to fight against antisemitism was relieved by contributions from a number of non-aligned, Green and Left MEPs.

Ex-UKIP independent Steven Woolfe, describing himself as of Black and Jewish heritage, and as a believer in the state of Israel, nonetheless said adopting the IHRA clause would mean preventing freedom of speech and creating fear of speaking out. “This definition is so broad and wide that if we adopt it we would have to jail Mahatma Gandhi for things he said about Palestine.”

Barbara Spinelli, an independent Italian politician whose mother was a German-Jewish anti-fascist activist, described the IHRA clause as “a trap”, because it includes elements that far exceed a proper definition of antisemitism, “hostility to Jews as Jews, full stop.” She argued that the European Parliament must listen to Jews who were critical of Israel, who wanted to combat all forms of xenophobia and who were opposed to the IHRA document.

Swedish Green MEP Bodil Valero pointed to the dangers of failing to distinguish between Jews and the state of Israel. It must be possible to criticise Israel without being accused of antisemitism. “Many Jewish peace organisations are quite clearly opposed to defining antisemitism in a way that endangers freedom of speech,” she said. Margrete Auken from Denmark’s Socialistik

Volkpartij quoted verbatim from the letter sent to MEPs earlier on Wednesday by the UK campaign group Free Speech on Israel on behalf of 11 Jewish organisations around Europe: “Endorsing the highly contentious and flawed IHRA document will not aid our collective endeavour to combat antisemitism. In our view, endorsement would significantly undermine the defences against antisemitism by expanding the concept in a politically motivated way.”

The full text of this letter, another from the umbrella group *European Jews for a Just Peace (EJJP)* analysing arguments put forward by the pro-Israel Transatlantic Institute, and the text of an important statement from the *Rabbinical Council of Jewish Voice for Peace* in the US can all be found at <http://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/european-parliament-antisemitism-debate/#more-3138> .

Notices

Speakers: BRICUP is always willing to help provide speakers for meetings. All such requests and any comments or suggestions concerning this Newsletter are welcome.

Email them to: newsletter@bricup.org.uk

Register as a supporter of BRICUP

You can register as a supporter of BRICUP and of the academic and cultural boycott of Israel [by completing this form](#).

We recognise that many individuals may wish to support our aims by private actions without wishing to be publicly identified. Supporters receive our regular newsletter by email and receive occasional emails giving details of urgent developments and of ways to support our activities. We do not disclose the names of our supporters to anyone outside BRICUP or share them with any other organisation.

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Financial support for BRICUP

We welcome one-off donations, but we can plan our work much better if people pledge regular payments by standing order. You can [download a justanding order form](#) here.

One-off donations may be made by sending a cheque to the Treasurer, at BRICUP, BM BRICUP, London, WC1N 3XX, UK or by making a bank transfer to BRICUP at **Sort Code** 08-92-99

Account Number 65156591

IBAN = GB20 CPBK 0892 9965 1565 91

BIC = CPBK GB22 .

If you use this mechanism, please confirm the transaction by sending an explanatory email to treasurer@bricup.org.uk