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“Antisemitism” The Making of Our Political Panic



Photo by Josh Hild

On May 15, 2025, Logan Rozos was the selected student speaker at NYU’s Gallatin School commencement. Briefly addressing the large crowd of faculty, students, their families and friends, Rozos offered brief remarks condemning “the current atrocities currently happening in Gaza” with U.S. financial, political, and military support. Nowhere in the short remarks were Israel or Jews mentioned. The remarks received prolonged applause from the students, followed by some jeers. Immediate social media accusations charged Rozos with “antisemitism” and “Jew hatred.” NYU, the country’s most expensive university, quickly condemned the remarks and withheld Rozos’s diploma as a consequence. A day later, at NYU’s Tisch School commencement, a group of faculty, in full regalia, stood on stage with white gags tied across their mouths, reminiscent of slavery’s muzzles. (Logan Rozos is Black

and transgender.) To date, NYU has restrained from disciplining them, concerned perhaps about further inflaming tensions.

The social costs of spiraling inflation place overbearing burdens on the many while proving profitable for the small group well positioned to benefit from rising prices. The latter tend to be those controlling conditions of political economy, the former those lacking such power. Spiraling charges of antisemitism today raise related questions about the consequent social costs of the manufactured political panic in play: undermining the social standing and prospects of Israel's critics, especially of those younger who have less institutional support or protection; intensification of uncertainty concerning what can be critically uttered and done; heightening of social conflict and the institutional costs from having to manage the impacts and fallout; and ultimately extending political control over institutions of higher education.

Accusations of rampant antisemitism on U.S. college campuses are fueling investigations by the Departments of Education and Justice. The Trump administration and Republican politicians have promoted the charges to assert greater control over prominent universities, private and public, regarding what can be taught as well as to limit critical political activity on campus. The NYU case illustrates larger dynamics in play.

Key to the Trumpian strategy has been to pit Jewish donors against administrations, faculty and student groups, and administrations, faculty, and students against each other. The aims are twofold. First, universities are being pressured into "deliberalizing" campus thinking, teaching, and culture. And second, Jewish supporters of higher education, traditionally more Democrat leaning, are being pitted against more progressive campus constituencies, further undermining the basis of anti-Republican strength. Inflating "antisemitism" has been key to these ends, encouraged by the current Israeli government and long fueled by Israel's support groups and organizations in the U.S. and globally.

Central to this strategy is adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA 2016) formulation as the key determinant of what counts as antisemitic. The IHRA account has been adopted by 40 states, including the U.S. State Department, and a host of other institutions, among them universities like Harvard, as their basis for placating the Trump administration by opposing "antisemitism," to the point of illegalizing it. Congressional Republicans have been pushing the Antisemitism Awareness Act. This would require the Department of Education to deploy the IHRA definition in its attacks on higher education, effectively criminalizing most criticism of Israel. The Act expands antisemitism's definition to include most anti-Zionist expression for the purposes of civil rights law. It thus seeks to curtail critical political speech. One exception Senate Republicans have introduced

reveal the politics in play. The charge that Jews killed Jesus, long a Christian nationalist assertion, would not be considered antisemitic (despite IHRA explicitly formulating it as such). Republicans would protect the claim in the name of advancing First Amendment free speech rights. The outcry has been muted, at most. It seems that not all actual antisemitism is, well, “antisemitism.”

IHRA’s principal author, Kenneth Stern, director of the Center for the Study of Hate at Bard College, has repeatedly emphasized that the “working definition” was never intended as a state or legal principle. Rather, it was provided as a working account to be used especially by European researchers to monitor expressions of antisemitism across the many countries on the continent. Stern is clear: IHRA should not be used to prohibit or restrict non-contemptuous criticism of Israel, or of Zionism, notwithstanding his own disagreements with such criticism.

On its face, the definition IHRA offers appears largely uncontroversial, centering “hatred of Jews.” If one substituted “hatred of Muslims” or “Islam” it could easily serve as a comparable formulation of Islamophobia. But “hatred” reduces more complex considerations to affective criteria, sliding by discriminatory group stereotyping or material dimensions. Following the likes of Charles Murray and Dinesh D’Souza, Christopher Rufo has suggested that group crime rates justify not hiring or admitting Black applicants for some positions. And “positive discrimination” might privilege group members at the expense of non-members. Theodor Herzl, a key founding figure of Zionism, famously offered the Sultan of Turkey free accounting service (“financial regulation”) by Jews in exchange for Palestine as the site for “the Jewish state.” Herzl was trading on the time-worn stereotype that Jews are good money-managers, the world’s Shylock in less flattering terms. Donald Trump has reportedly mimicked the characterization: “Black guys counting my money! I hate it. The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yarmulkes every day.” These sorts of gross characterizations reinforce the longstanding antisemitic stereotype of Jews controlling the local or global financial system.

Given antisemitism’s conceptual elasticity, then, it becomes understandable why Stern cautioned against adoption of IHRA as a formal legal account. The more fraught terrain across which both antisemitism and Islamophobia operate suggests turning to an actionable disposition rather than an affective consideration to ground plausibility to charges of antisemitism or Islamophobia. Both are expressive or active *antagonisms* towards and on the basis of uniquely picking out Jews and Muslims, or their institutions, respectively—for character traits, actions, social standings or roles attributed to the group as such. This would

make the definition's applicability far less nebulous and porous than the claimed basis on hatred. The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) offers a more fine-grained account than IHRA's, one consistent with that I offer here. It parses out antagonisms as "discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence" directed at "Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish"). Antagonism is a disposition of antipathy, treating Jews (or Muslims in the case of Islamophobia) differently or for pejoratively different reasons than others.

The JDA offers a careful set of guidelines for what counts as antisemitism, most notably regarding criticism of Israel. Tellingly, its definition has received far less uptake, application, or discussion than the more elastic and easily weaponized IHRA formulation. It has been adopted, as far as I can tell, by no states. Like the IHRA definition, though, it explicitly rejects being codified into law.

The IHRA controversy, however, is made to turn less on its actual definition and more readily on the sorts of examples of antisemitism it offers as heuristics. Pretty much the entire public conversation around adopting the IHRA account slides by the formal definition, leaving it unmentioned. Instead, the examples are taken up as if inevitably instances of antisemitic expression no matter the circumstance and without exception. The examples effectively serve as definitional substitute.

A careful reading of the IHRA document, however, calls for a more nuanced, less definitive analysis of what "might" or "may" or "could" amount to antisemitic expression, depending on "overall context" in specific circumstances. Sloppy readings of provisional considerations of "overall context" nevertheless have opened IHRA applicability to an expansive range of instances, loosening parameters currently in play, while also rendering any specific determination prone to more or less robust contestation. The overwhelming effect has been accusation inflation and expression suppression. Mere accusation has foreclosed analysis, been made guilt-producing. Its political uptake has been designed to produce panic, by individuals and institutions.

The eighth example IHRA offers, arguably the key one, is especially telling here. What counts as antisemitism is "the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity" *unless* "criticism of Israel [is] similar to that leveled against any other country." (Five of the eleven examples offered focus on statements about Israel.) The qualification is so central to IHRA that example 8 is repeated verbatim from the claim made in the preamble paragraph to the eleven examples IHRA offers. The conditional is invariably disregarded by those adopting IHRA's account. The definition is effectively read as "classif[ying] most anti-Zionism as antisemitic."

Consider this: Were a person—call them X—to say they hate Russia for the way it has treated Ukrainians few if any would so much as blink. But were X to say they hate Israel because of the way it has treated Palestinians, Israel's supporters would quickly turn them into an antisemite, threatening their career if not life. What's the difference exactly? The latter would certainly not be transgressing the letter and, for Stern, spirit of the IHRA definition. X would not be saying they hate Jews but criticizing the state of Israel in ways they might reasonably criticize another state, say Russia, as IHRA insists they must if not to qualify as antisemitic.

In response, Israel now declares itself not just a Jewish state but the state of all Jews. For a Jew to say it is not their state is not to declare themselves not Jewish, even if Netanyahu's state seems to be gesturing to that declaration. It is to say Israel is not the state of this Jew, and a growing number of others like them in this regard. One might say something analogous of Russia, or Ukraine, of most all other states. Ethnicity is not reducible to state belonging. It is not that one would rather not be bound by its laws, culture, or politics. Netanyahu's belligerent state is ready to radically narrow the range and diversity of Jewishness, effectively reducing official "Jewishness" to a minority of an already distinct global minority. This would make Jewish Israel far less secure and more vulnerable than advancing the longstanding Jewish tradition, traceable to the Torah, of embracing the stranger, and living justly with the neighbor.

A careful reading of this particular IHRA example, then, more generally implies that critics of Israel reasonably objecting to any state defining itself on reductively ethno-religious, -national, or -racial grounds would *prima facie* not qualify as antisemitic. A critic questioning the Israeli government's self-characterization in law and policy as "*the Jewish state*" materially and legally privileging Jews while restricting in materially discriminatory ways all who are not would not be questioning only Jewish self-determination or sovereignty. Grounding such criticism on a general theory that any such state ends up invariably precluding those not meeting the (usually shifting) criteria of ethno-religious belonging is not reductively anti-Jewish. States ethno-religiously self-defined (no matter the religion) almost inevitably turn repressive to sustain their ethno-purity. Once embracing secularity, they usually scale back some on state violence or restriction against those of different ethnic or religious background even as the state might retain vestiges of its historical culture usually referenced as its "national character." The latter might take on pernicious implication at the hands of a nationalist government but, unlike ethno-religious ones, secular states do not invariably end up doing so.

Those inflating political charges of antisemitism have overwhelmingly ignored, if not resisted, more fine-grained analysis of the kind suggested here. President Trump's commitment to rooting out antisemitism from college campuses, and seeking to deport non-citizen campus critics of Israel, proceeds by reductively collapsing ethnicity with a political state. Stern is right. Most criticisms of Zionism should not be deemed antisemitic, as Israel's supporters too often charge. Zionism, after all, is a political ideology. It is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for Jewishness. Criticisms of Zionism are not necessarily antisemitic unless linking it perniciously to Jewishness. Those defending against political criticisms of Zionism most often dismissively reduce all anti-Zionism to antisemitism. This mere assertion, nevertheless, does not create the fact of it, nor a shield from the reach of justice.

Harvard's reports on Antisemitism and on Islamophobia, both released April 29, 2025, reveal the numbers of Harvard Jewish and Muslim constituents expressing fear of antagonism towards them on campus. The data are telling. Well over 2,000 Harvard faculty, staff, and students responded to a survey. Almost half of Muslim (47 percent), 15 percent of Jewish, and 6 percent of Christian respondents felt physically unsafe on campus. Nearly all Muslims (92 percent), 61 percent of Jews, and 51 percent of Christians registered anxiety about expressing their political views. And yet the overwhelming focus—at Harvard, in media reports, by the Trump administration—has been on antisemitism.

Antisemitism no doubt exists on campuses. It tends to be generally reflective of the antisemitism at any point in the culture at large. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the reported numbers have spiked following Israel's dramatically disproportionate, increasingly genocidal response to the murderous Hamas attacks of October 7. But reports of the robust spike in instances of campus antisemitism require careful disaggregation too. Antisemitic language has been used by some, perhaps especially a small number of students, critical of Israel's actions in Gaza. Whether such expression is all a product of sustained antisemitic belief, thoughtless insensitivity, or caught up in the emotion of the moment remain open questions. It is not clear to what degree the spike in reports has been inflated by treating most any criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza as antisemitic for making Israel-supporting Jewish students "uncomfortable" or "distressed." It is also unclear to what degree Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian antagonisms have ramped up: the Harvard reports suggest they have to a significantly greater degree than antisemitism.

Anyone identifying with or expressing support for Israel in the wake of October 7 may well feel discomfort due to even reasonably articulated concerns about genocidal reactions by the Israeli state to the attacks. Jews, as some have pointed out, understandably feel especially

sensitive about Israel being charged with genocide. And relatedly, there is great resistance to admitting that Israel's leaders could be driving one. That campus supporters of Israel tend to report a dramatic spike in antisemitism while Jewish critics of Israel do not suggests that the underlying sensitivities tend often to prompt the charge of antisemitism out of the discomfort. Discomfort alone, however, doesn't fit either the IHRA or JDA definitions. The tension between discomfort, sometimes produced by insensitive expression by young students, and students' like Logan Rozos's cutting critiques of genocidal destruction will not be resolved by pedagogical institutions turned punishment machines. The Genocide Convention characterizes genocide as intentionally eliminating or harming some (not necessarily all) members of a group by killing or removal. Copious evidence of this exists in Gaza. The notable Haaretz journalist, Gideon Levy, recently indicated that Netanyahu's current undertaking is to "exterminate" *all* Palestinians in Gaza. Former Knesset member and now head of a far-right libertarian party, Zehut, Moshe Feiglin, recently declared that "Every child in Gaza is the enemy. . . not a single Gazan child will be left [in Gaza]." Those condemning Israel, both Jewish and not, have been antagonistically targeted by some stridently Israel-supporting faculty and non-campus observers, almost invariably with the prompting or support from Israel-supporting organizations. The latter hardly ever face campus disciplinary action when their accusations against named individuals or groups prove after vigorous campus administrative investigation, including by outside lawyers, to be fabricated at worst or exaggerated at least.

The contrasts in response to Islamophobia or anti-Palestinian and antisemitic antagonisms are telling. There are no accounts of pro-Israel students beaten up by off-campus thugs or police, being picked up by ICE and threatened with deportation without due process, as Palestinian-supporting students and faculty have been. There are very few cases of disciplinary action against Jewish defenders of Israel. Shai Davidai, Israeli faculty member in Columbia's Business School, was briefly barred from campus in late 2024, whereas Columbia Law School's Katherine Franke, a vocal critic of Israel, was forced into early retirement. There have been streams of disciplinary action against students, Palestinian or Jewish, critical of Israel's ongoing massacre in Gaza, as there have been against those protesting Israel's treatment of Palestinians well before Oct 7. Palestinian (and indeed Jewish) faculty critical of Israel regularly receive death threats.

Government spokespersons, American and Israeli, as well as mainstream media, have instantaneously characterized as "antisemitic" Elias Rodriguez's chilling murder of two Israeli embassy employees in Washington D.C. The same is true of the awful flame-throwing

attacks by Mohamed Soliman on those holding a vigil calling for the release of the remaining hostages held by Hamas in Boulder this past Sunday. That there is no justification for such violence should not distract from the fact that, to date, there is no evidence either was aimed at Jews as Jews. Both were directed at Israel for its war on Palestinians (and not just on Hamas), by attacking its employees or supporters. In both cases the perpetrators shouted “Free Palestine,” adding no words at the scene or on social media about Jews. The murders and attacks, each conducted by lone men and horrific as both events were, will also likely heighten not dissipate violence against Palestinians. In the ten days between the embassy murders and Boulder attacks, Israel killed well over six hundred Gazans, including many peacefully lining up at a food distribution site after two months of Israel’s preventing any aid reaching Gaza. These killings have received far less media coverage than the two U.S. events. Mainstream reports of the IDF bombings have almost completely maintained anonymity of those killed. No one should be subjected to violent assaults like these, whether conducted by loners or states.

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Targeting of Israel’s critics as antisemitic appear to ramp up exactly when Israel’s government makes public and carries out its violent plans in Gaza. Charges of “antisemitism” against critics now represent a textbook case of a politically- and media-inspired moral panic, as theorized in the 1970s by Stanley Cohen and Stuart Hall. Concerns about some incidents become blown up to include an entire population, all members of which then get targeted, further exacerbating the panic about the group. The initial concern, linked to a long historical animosity, becomes ramified into the stereotype. Much as racism historically manifested race, the political panic produces the targeted population, not the reverse.

The strident attacks on Israel’s critics are not happenstance. They are produced by well-funded organizations, some financially supported by Israeli state entities as well as by Jewish American billionaires. StandWithUs, Canary Mission, and Betar have all made it a central cause to use any means available to them to shut down criticism of Israel, including providing the Trump administration with names of Israel’s critics to deport.

“Discomfort” and “distress” are the sort of psychic sensibilities that IHRA’s centering of hate in defining antisemitism has tended to encourage. That these considerations are so subjective render inflationary antisemitism that much easier and politically effective. They silence most public and campus reference to the “hundred’s year war” on Palestinians. In classrooms and forums, accusation and political theatre have substituted for any need to provide arguments to support Israel’s actions. The recourse is mostly to claims of “existential threat.” Quick

charges of “existential threat,” while perhaps understandable against the backdrop of mid-twentieth century history, cannot close down debate, let alone criticism.

Despite the accusations, Harvard University is hardly the hotbed of rampant antisemitism, “perpetuating an unsafe campus environment that is hostile to Jewish students, promotes pro-Hamas sympathies,” as Homeland Security Director Kristi Noem recently charged. That’s not to say there is no antisemitism at Harvard, nor that there is not more post October 8 than before it. Where Jewish organizations such as Hillel are the objects of Israel-critical protest, these would count as antisemitic only where the campus organization has no record of supporting, embracing, defending, or rationalizing Israel’s devastation of Gaza. Where there is no such record, targeting a Jewish organization or institution—Hillel or a synagogue, say—would be doing so because identified as Jewish. But where the institution’s membership or board as such has supported Israel’s actions in Gaza, criticism becomes legitimate public political expression. Criticizing the ADL for these attacks would not count as antisemitic unless criticisms included evident antisemitic stereotypes or self-evident presuppositions. Concretely, the Anti-Defamation League has attacked critics of Israel’s actions in Gaza. Harvard and other universities like Columbia have too readily ignored these distinctions in the interests of placating the Trump administration only to find out that whatever concessions the university makes never satisfy Trump’s political calculus.

Charges of antisemitism now serve as the dead end (excuse the metaphor) for acknowledging the kind of genocidal action taking place before us. Genocides thankfully have never completed themselves, despite the deadly suffering they produce. But as Jews and Germans today could surely both attest in their own ways, or South Africans for that matter, they leave indelible marks not just on victims and perpetrators but on generations of their offspring alike.

Antisemitisms have seen some increase, as I’ve said. The increase in reports and charges is driven in part by concerns for Israel, the heartfelt covering for the politically cynical. Concerns about Jewish student wellbeing are amplified, those for Palestinian or Muslim students relatedly under-emphasized, even ignored. In response to Harvard’s antisemitism report, a Trump administration spokesman declared that “Universities’ violation of federal law, due to their blatant reluctance to protect Jewish students and defend civil rights, is unbecoming of institutions seeking billions in taxpayer funds.” They were deafeningly silent in response to the Harvard report on Islamophobia.

Trump’s vocal stress on college antisemitism (spurred on by the likes of the Heritage Foundation’s Project Esther) was fueled initially by Elise Stefanik’s grilling of then Harvard

President Claudine Gay in a December 2024 congressional hearing on college antisemitism and the outcry that followed Gay's floundering. As he assumed power, Trump mobilized antisemitism as a wedge issue to assert increasing control over college constituencies long critical of both him and ultra-right nationalism. This embrace has helped to undermine confidence in university knowledge-making, as much in the natural as human sciences. This, in turn, was meant to politically elevate the claim to deific presidential authority, to fill the vacuity left in the wake of the skepticism.

"Antisemitism" has served politically for the second Trump administration much as the attack on Critical Race Theory did for Republicans from 2020-2022. Looking strong on confronting campus "antisemitism" has helped to cover up some of the administration's dramatic erosion of civil rights much as the anti-CRT campaigns did in conservative states and the anti-DEI and anti-woke focus more nationally since. In her letter to Harvard purporting to end Harvard's capacity to admit international students, Director Noem explicitly linked antisemitism to Harvard's "employ[ing] racist 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' policies." The politics of inflationary antisemitism serves, in short, as heavy artillery in conservatism's war on woke.

The political roiling of campuses around matters of Israel and Palestine poses a larger question, however. Israel's supporters, whether governments, institutions, or individuals, are at least implicitly supporting Palestinian removal in Gaza and, through annexation, in the West Bank too. Those more explicit in this commitment characterize Palestinians as "human animals," to be eliminated by bombing, starvation, or "self-deportation." Not a condemnatory word has been uttered by those supporting Israel's crusade against Gaza of Feiglin's call to "kill all Gazan babies". *Inflationary antisemitism* is the rationalizing legitimization of this crusade.

The political panic around antisemitism, then, has exacerbated anxiety of its occurrence. And this heightened anxiety, in turn, tends to find it around every corner, in every critical statement concerning Israel's actions, in every damnation of its excesses. The panic produces the "proof."

The larger question, then, concerns the tough work in the face of all this not just of reconciliation but as a stepping-stone to addressing what now seems even more impossible: how to live together, across separation divides such as borders but especially also literally as next-door neighbors, as partners in governing and commerce, even as friends and lovers? What would it take to find or really reparatively *make* ways of living together side-by-side, on campuses and in classrooms as in cities and countrysides, engaging with each other rather

than fenced off by ideological or actual walls? Inflationary antisemitism serves to wall out even thinking this possibility, let alone its realization.

The political panic of “antisemitism” is exemplified by the fact that anything critical of Israel can now be dismissed in its name. Four years ago Christopher Rufo torched Critical Race Theory as a communist plot initiated in the 1960s by four Jewish European philosophers. The charge was repeated ad nauseam by his prominent followers like Ted Cruz, Ron DeSantis, and Mark Levine despite abundant evidence of its complete historical fabrication. No one registered the slightest concern that the claim represents as classic a trope of Nazi-like antisemitism as one might find.

The political instrumentalization of “antisemitism”—now screeched save when proving all too inconvenient—empties the charge of the necessary power when really needed as a timely weapon to face down deadly attacks on Jews *and* Palestinians. Frantz Fanon famously declared that when Jews are attacked, Blacks should pay attention as they would be next. We might now say that when Palestinians are attacked, most notably by Israel and its supporters, Jews especially should pay attention. “Antisemitism” today renders more powerless the defense against the much more dangerous antisemitism of the Christian nationalists when tomorrow they no longer find useful the currently convenient embrace of the Judeo- to Christian ascension.

These are the challenges of our times, as pressing today as ever in the wake of ideological elasticity and the production of panic. It requires a response from every one of us, and from the university we want in our world. It is the question, after all, of how ultimately we choose, individually and interactively, to inhabit our humanity.

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