

January 23, 2023

Dear Ministers Rodriguez and Hussien,

As organizations and individuals committed to both anti-racism and freedom of expression—amongst us recipients of Canadian Heritage grants—we are deeply concerned by [recent statements](#) indicating the department’s possible use of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA WDA) for the purposes of attestation and vetting of Canadian Heritage applicants/grantees, as well as training of departmental officers.[1]

We understand that these measures have been proposed in response to a series of troubling tweets posted by a contractor to an organization that received funds from Canadian Heritage. However, we believe that the possible application of the IHRA WDA in response to this incident risks casting a chill within Canadian civil society that will negatively impact the anti-racism work of Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, Jewish, racialized, feminist, 2SLGBTQ+, labour, human rights, academic, arts and civil liberties organizations.

Not only has the IHRA WDA been widely discredited as [“vague and incoherent”](#), it also [fails to sufficiently capture](#) right-wing and white supremacist antisemitism, and therefore does a disservice to the fight against antisemitism and anti-racism work more broadly. In her [October 2022 report](#) to the General Assembly, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, E. Tendayi Achiume, urged all States to “suspend the adoption and promotion of the working definition and the examples attached to it”, [highlighting](#) “the controversial status, divisive effects and negative human rights impacts” of the IHRA WDA.

The lead drafter of the IHRA WDA, Kenneth Stern, has also raised concern about the definition being [“weaponized”](#) to shut down criticism of Israel.[2] Originally drafted for academic purposes, illustrative examples were appended to the definition to examine possible correlations with antisemitism. As Stern has [pointed out](#), the examples were not intended as incontrovertible illustrations of antisemitism in and of themselves, but that is how they have been used in practice. While several of the examples are indeed clearcut manifestations of antisemitism, others such as calling Israel a “racist endeavour”, or treating Israel with “double standards”, can and [have been](#) instrumentalized by pro-Israel advocacy groups to silence legitimate criticism of Israeli state policy and/or the ideology of Zionism.[3]

A recently published document by the Adopt IHRA Coalition highlighting 50 so-called “antisemitic tweets” is a case in point. As [Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East](#) demonstrates, much of what is identified as antisemitic according to the IHRA WDA is simply speech critical of Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians. This has broadly resulted in speech suppression and often racist harassment campaigns—particularly in the form of Anti-Palestinian Racism—which have been documented extensively by [Independent Jewish Voices Canada](#), the [Arab Canadian Lawyers Association](#), and the [Islamophobia Studies Centre](#), among others.

Ministers, applying the IHRA WDA for the purposes of vetting, attestation, and training sets a dangerous precedent that would suppress the fundamental rights of Canadians to freedom

of expression protected under section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In effect, it would institute a different double standard, singling out Israel and its policies for protection from anti-racist critique, while permitting similar speech in reference to other countries. For example, while an organization that receives Heritage funding can presumably suggest that Canada is a “racist endeavor” (eg. a settler-colonial project), suggesting the same about Israel would be off-limits. Applying the IHRA WDA to applicants and grantees moreover risks undermining the very anti-racism work the government seeks to support.

Ministers, we strongly urge you to:

1. Not use the IHRA WDA for the purposes of vetting and attestation of Canadian Heritage applicants and grantees, or for the training of program officers.
2. Base any future anti-racism measures, including the renewal of the Anti-Racism Strategy, on full and transparent consultation with all affected parties and stakeholders, including this letter’s signatories.

Sincerely,[4]

1. Amnesty International Canada (English speaking)
2. Amnistie internationale Canada (French speaking)
3. Arab Canadian Lawyers Association (ACLA)
4. BC Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA)
5. Canadian Arab Federation (CAF)
6. Canadian Arab Institute (CAI)
7. Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT)
8. Canadian Federation of Students (CFS)
9. Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC – Quakers)
10. Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME)
11. Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW)
12. Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association (CMLA)
13. Catholics for Justice and Peace in the Holy Land (CJPHL)
14. Centre for Free Expression (CFE)
15. Coalition of Canadian Palestinian Organizations (CCPO)
16. Fédération nationale des enseignantes et des enseignants du Québec (FNEEQ-CSN)
17. Independent Jewish Voices Canada (IJV)
18. The Jewish Faculty Network (JFN)

19. Just Peace Advocates (JPA)
20. Ligue des droits et libertés (LDL)
21. The Legal Centre for Palestine (LCP)
22. No Pride In Policing Coalition (NPPC)
23. Ottawa Forum on Israel/Palestine (OFIP)
24. Queer Ontario (QO)
25. Standing Up for Racial Justice Toronto (SURJ)
26. Palestinian-Canadian Academics and Artists Network (PCAN)
27. Palestinian Canadian Congress (PCC)
28. Toronto Palestine Film Festival (TPFF)
29. United Jewish People's Order / Morris Winchevsky Centre (UJPO - MWC)
30. The United Church of Canada (UCC)
31. Urban Alliance on Race Relations (UARR)
32. West Coast Coalition Against Racism (WCCAR)

Endnotes:

[1] According to statements Minister Hussen made at the briefing in question, there are several ways in which the IHRA WDA would be applied in relation to organizational grantees:

1. “[E]nhanced online and social media vetting training and enhanced diversity and inclusion training for all program officers, including anti-Semitism and anti-racism awareness training, all of which will be informed by the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism.” These trainings, we are told, will be developed in partnership with “the special envoy to combat anti-Semitism, the Honourable Irwin Cotler... [Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center](#) and the Jewish Public Servants’ Network.”
2. An “attestation to applicants so they’re able to proactively commit to live by the standards expected of them with respect to making sure their organization – including any consultant, employee, partner, or anybody associated with it – cannot engage in racist, anti-Semitic or hateful behaviour or comments against Black Canadians or francophone community members, and that if that happens, we can take quick action.” The Minister further specifies that this attestation “will proactively require applicants to commit to the standards of the Canadian Human Rights Act and to the anti-racism framework.” Our assumption is that the latter document refers to Canada’s Anti-racism Strategy, which currently includes the IHRA WDA.

[2] Opposition to the institutionalization of IHRA in Canada has also been expressed by, *inter alia*: the New Israel Fund of Canada; the Jewish Faculty Network; the Union of BC Indian

Chiefs; the Canadian Labour Congress; the BC Civil Liberties Association; the Canadian Association of University Teachers, the University of Toronto and over 40 Canadian faculty associations and academic unions.

[3] There are many better definitions of antisemitism that don't conflate antisemitism with criticism of Israel. The [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#), signed by 300 of the world's top Holocaust and Jewish Studies scholars, is one such definition.

[4] The risk of censorship, including loss of funding, meant that several organizations declined to sign this letter in fear of retaliation from the Canadian government.