

Alyza D. Lewin ~ Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 445

Good afternoon, Chairman Wanggaard and Members of the Committee. My name is Alyza Lewin. I'm President of US Affairs for the Combat Antisemitism Movement. I am an attorney and have devoted my professional time and expertise for more than 30 years to countering religious discrimination and antisemitism, including by providing legal support to students on university campuses. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 445.

Many today seem unable or unwilling to distinguish between a good-faith political debate about the conflicts in the Middle East on the one hand, and the vilification of Jews on the other. They mistakenly think that if the term "Israel" or "Zionist" is mentioned, it's about politics, not Jews. They refuse to recognize Jewish peoplehood and the Jews' deep ancestral connection to the land of Israel.

Jews define their Jewishness in many different ways. Some emphasize religious belief and practice, while others emphasize history and culture. The overwhelming majority of Jews, however, see themselves as part of a people, with a shared ancestral heritage, deeply rooted in the Land of Israel.

Today, those who recognize that the Jews are a people indigenous to Israel are frequently demonized, branded as "Zionists," blamed for the world's misfortune, and treated as pariahs. Marginalizing, shunning, excluding or assaulting Jews due to their actual or perceived connection to Israel is antisemitism. Permitting those who engage in such harassing and discriminatory conduct to avoid liability by hiding behind a First Amendment mask, shields the abusers and leaves the victims unprotected.

The IHRA Definition provides a framework for recognizing contemporary Jew-hatred and distinguishing it from a political debate.

The definition does not silence, prohibit, or punish speech. It merely labels antisemitism.

In fact, according to the IHRA definition, "criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic." It's not antisemitic to criticize the policies of the Israeli government. It is, however, antisemitic to demonize, delegitimize or apply a double standard to individual Jews, the Jewish people, or Israel as the Jewish collective. When Jews are targeted on the basis of the Jewish people's shared ancestry and ethnicity rooted in the land of Israel, that is also antisemitism.

Hate that is not addressed, does not evaporate, it escalates. Antisemitic chants evolve into antisemitic violence. If we want to block this progression, we must be able to recognize, call out, and address all forms of contemporary antisemitism. That is why it is essential to adopt a definition that will enable everyone from university administrators to law enforcement to distinguish between Jew-hatred and a political debate. Thank you.