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Opinion: Antisemitism bill doesn't silence debate, it protects students

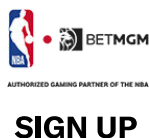
By Rabbi Jeffrey Abraham and Stacey Newman

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The Missouri state capitol dome in Jefferson City.
Christian Gooden, Post-Dispatch

By Rabbi Jeffrey Abraham and Stacey Newman



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As the Missouri General Assembly considers **HB2061**, a bill that would adopt the global standard working definition of antisemitism, some have tried to obscure what the bill does and does not do. It's time to set the record straight.

HB2061 does not ban criticism of Israel, restrict speech, or declare political disagreement antisemitic. What it does is provide schools and law enforcement with a widely accepted and practical framework to identify and respond to antisemitic conduct when it occurs, just as they already do with other forms of bias.

Opponents of the bill argue otherwise, but their claims rest on mischaracterizations of both the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism and the reality facing Jewish students today.

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*[Related: "**Missouri must reject this warped definition of antisemitism**," Feb. 5 Post-Dispatch.]*

The IHRA definition is used by the State Department, 37 U.S. states, the European Parliament, dozens of democratic governments, and more than 1,000 municipalities, universities, and school systems precisely because it recognizes both classic and modern forms of antisemitism, which often presents itself through conspiracy theories, collective blame, and the unique denial of Jewish self-determination.

The definition explicitly states that criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country is not antisemitic. Claims that IHRA creates a First Amendment carve out ignore this plain language. HB2061 specifically addresses prohibited conduct, not speech, and notes that “Nothing in this section shall be construed to diminish or infringe upon any right protected under the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States or the Constitution of Missouri.”

Opponents of HB2061 make spurious arguments to contest the bill, such as citing selective quotes from early Zionist thinkers to argue that describing Israel’s founding as racist would be deemed antisemitic. In reality, no student could be disciplined for discussing any historical figure. A basic reading of the bill demonstrates that academic inquiry is not at risk.

Opponents’ sleight of hand continues by pointing to data on Jewish feelings about Israel. In a recent op-ed, they claim, “it is nonsensical to adopt a definition of antisemitism that would label a large and rapidly growing number of Jews antisemitic (in the St. Louis area alone, a survey ... found that less than half of adult Jews St. Louis area consider themselves to be Zionists).”

This is both false and misleading. First, adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism cannot label any individual antisemitic because it pertains to conduct, not beliefs. Second, the IHRA definition makes no claim that not being a Zionists is antisemitic.

Finally, while the word “Zionist” has been run through the mud, causing some to dissociate from the label. That same survey found that 90% of St. Louis Jews agreed with the statement, “Israel should exist as a refuge for the Jewish people, now and in

the future.” In other words, while the survey quoted by opponents of HB2061 found that many Jewish St. Louisans do not use the term Zionist to describe themselves, 90% are Zionists by virtue of the beliefs they hold.

This underscores just how fringe anti-Zionism is in the Jewish community. Polling released last week found that just 7% of American Jews identify as anti-Zionist, consistent with polling from November showing this number at 3%.

Ultimately, this is the point of the opposition to the IHRA definition of antisemitism. Activists who seek the nullification of Israel as a Jewish state are threatened by the fact that it identifies the point at which anti-Zionism crosses into antisemitism.

Dedicated anti-Zionists want you to believe that actions designed to further the dismantlement of the world’s only Jewish state can never be discriminatory. By naming the denial of Jewish self-determination as antisemitic when applied uniquely to Jews, IHRA confronts a political position that insists Israel’s elimination is morally neutral or purely analytical. For those invested in that position, the definition is threatening not because it suppresses speech, but because it exposes the racial and exclusionary logic embedded within it.

This is exactly why HB2061 is necessary. Antisemitism has unique characteristics that are frequently misunderstood or overlooked by educators. When schools lack a clear definition, incidents are either ignored or mishandled, eroding trust and leaving students unprotected. The bill provides clarity and consistency so that schools can respond appropriately rather than arbitrarily when incidents arise.

Missouri lawmakers are not being asked to referee Middle East politics. They are being asked to ensure that Jewish students are accorded the same protections as every other group facing bias.

At a time when antisemitic incidents are rising nationwide, clarity is not repression. It is responsibility. And Missouri must not shy away from it.



Rabbi Jeffrey Abraham is the senior rabbi of Congregation B'nai Amoona in Creve Coeur. Stacey Newman recently served nine years in the Missouri House of Representatives.