

Who Has the Right to Define Antisemitism?

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates how “antisemitism” is used to stifle criticism of Israel. IHRA constructs a dimension of Israel’s national identity and history that claims the state’s existence while advancing its agenda amidst its human rights controversies. Israeli contribution to developing a platform offered by the IHRA to assess and consider others’ behavior. The perception of antisemitism promoted by Israel is rejected by numerous countries, institutions, and Jewish foundations. The study is conducted through an extensive literature review, scrutinizing key documents and primary sources, including official IHRA texts that delineate the conceptualization and application of antisemitism within state policies, alongside the JDA as an alternative discursive framework that challenges the IHRA’s paradigm. Furthermore, secondary data sources are systematically analyzed, encompassing human rights reports from organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. By using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this paper discloses Israeli motives and reviews “the IHRA definition” and the JDA response to IHRA’s “a working definition” using a discourse theoretical framework, as we concluded that Israel uses IHRA to shape the global perspective on antisemitism. This has led to debates questioning who has the authority to define “antisemitism” to prevent its misuse.

Keywords: Antisemitism; Israel; IHRA; Human Rights.

Abstrak

Tulisan ini menunjukkan bagaimana istilah “antisemitisme” digunakan untuk membungkam kritik terhadap negara Israel. IHRA membentuk suatu dimensi dari identitas nasional dan sejarah Israel yang menegaskan keberadaan negara tersebut sekaligus mendorong agenda politiknya di tengah berbagai kontroversi hak asasi manusia. Israel berkontribusi dalam mengembangkan platform yang ditawarkan oleh IHRA untuk menilai dan mempertimbangkan perilaku pihak lain. Persepsi tentang antisemitisme yang dipromosikan oleh Israel ditolak oleh banyak negara, institusi, dan organisasi Yahudi. Penelitian ini menggunakan tinjauan pustaka mendalam, menganalisis dokumen kunci dan sumber primer, termasuk kebijakan resmi IHRA yang mendealienasi konseptualisasi dan penggunaan antisemitisme dalam kebijakan negara, sekaligus JDA sebagai kerangka diskursif alternatif yang menantang paradigma IHRA. Lebih lanjut, data sekunder juga dianalisis secara sistematis, yang meliputi laporan dari Amnesty International dan Human Rights Watch. Dengan menggunakan Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), makalah ini mengungkap motif Israel dan mengkaji “definisi IHRA” serta tanggapan JDA terhadap “definisi kerja” IHRA dengan menggunakan kerangka teori diskursus. Kami menyimpulkan bahwa Israel menggunakan IHRA untuk membentuk perspektif global mengenai antisemitisme. Hal ini telah memicu perdebatan mengenai siapa yang memiliki hak untuk mendefinisikan “antisemitisme” untuk mencegah penyalahgunaannya.

Kata Kunci : Antisemitisme; Israel; IHRA; Hak Asasi Manusia.

Introduction

The debate over who holds the authority to define antisemitism is a complex issue within global discourse. This controversy is primarily driven by the divergence between the definition of antisemitism established by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2016 and various alternative frameworks, such as the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA), introduced in 2021. The fundamental disparity between these definitions lies not only in their conceptualization of antisemitism itself but also in the political and legal ramifications of their application in public policy and freedom of expression across different nations (Klug 2018).

The IHRA definition asserts that antisemitism constitutes a specific perception of Jewish people that may manifest as hatred toward them and includes 11 illustrative examples. Among these, seven explicitly pertain to Israel, prompting criticism that the IHRA conflates antisemitism with political critiques of Israeli policies (Butler 2020). One of the most contentious examples within the IHRA framework is the assertion that drawing parallels between Israeli policies and those of Nazi Germany constitutes antisemitism. This classification has sparked intense debate, as it categorizes criticism of Israel within the broader scope of antisemitism, which, according to some, undermines freedom of speech and blurs the distinction between discrimination against Jewish people and legitimate political critique of Israeli policies. Critics argue that this framework serves as a mechanism to suppress dissent against Israel, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Engel 2017).

As a counterbalance to the IHRA framework, numerous human rights activists and scholars formulated the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) to establish a more transparent and politically unbiased definition of antisemitism. The contrast between the IHRA and JDA definitions underscores a deeper paradigmatic divergence in conceptualizing antisemitism. Whereas the IHRA closely associates antisemitism with discourse on Israel, the JDA distinctly separates antisemitism from political debates regarding the state of Israel and its policies. JDA underscores that antisemitism pertains specifically to discrimination, prejudice, hostility, or violence against Jewish individuals based on their Jewish identity but does not encompass critique of Zionism, Israel, or Israeli policies unless such critique involves racial hatred or antisemitic stereotyping (Bronner 2000; Lustick 2021). This raises a fundamental question: Who possesses the authority to define antisemitism? Should this responsibility rest with nation-states, the global Jewish community, scholars, or human rights organizations?

The complexity of this debate is further exacerbated by the implications that each definition carries for freedom of expression. A number of scholars and human rights organizations reject the IHRA definition on the grounds that it provides Israel with a tool to suppress criticism of its policies, particularly in relation to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Professor David Feldman, Director of the Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism at Birkbeck, University of London, argues that the IHRA definition is “excessively broad, ambiguous, and susceptible to misuse as a means of restricting free speech” (Feldman 2018). Conversely, the JDA upholds that Israeli policies should and must be subject to scrutiny like those of any other state, without such critique being automatically classified as antisemitic (Butler 2020).

Drawing upon discourse theory (Foucault 1980), this study seeks to analyze how the definition of antisemitism is constructed, who holds the authority to establish it, and how these definitions are deployed within global political contexts. A nuanced understanding of how power operates in shaping the meaning of antisemitism is crucial to ensuring that opposition to antisemitism is not misappropriated to silence criticism of certain actors’ behaviors.

Methods

This descriptive qualitative study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the construction and deployment of antisemitism definitions within diverse political and socio-cultural landscapes. This analytical framework facilitates an in-depth exploration of how power dynamics are embedded in language and discourse, particularly concerning the definitional authority exercised by the IHRA and the counter-narrative presented by the JDA. The study is conducted through an extensive literature review, scrutinizing key documents and primary sources, including official IHRA texts that delineate the conceptualization and application of antisemitism within state policies, alongside the JDA as an alternative discursive framework that challenges the IHRA’s paradigm. Furthermore, secondary data sources are systematically analyzed, encompassing human rights reports from organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which address freedom of expression in the context of the Israel-Palestine discourse, as well as media narratives and statements from scholars and policymakers articulating support for or opposition to the IHRA definition.

Theoretical Framework: Michel Foucault's Discourse

This study employs Michel Foucault's discourse theory as an analytical foundation to examine how the discourse of antisemitism is constructed, regulated, and instrumentalized as a mechanism of power in global politics. Foucault's discourse theory underscores the ways in which language and social practices shape our understanding of reality. As a seminal French philosopher, Foucault is renowned for his intellectual contributions on discourse, power, and knowledge. One of his principal theoretical advancements is the concept of discourse, which interrogates how language, social practices, and institutional frameworks condition our perceptions of reality. In Foucault's view, discourse extends beyond mere communication; it encompasses an intricate system of thought, regulatory mechanisms, and practices that determine what can be articulated, who possesses the authority to speak, and how meaning is constructed within a given socio-political context.

Foucault not only developed discourse theory but also provided a methodological approach for its analysis. One such approach is CDA, which examines how power relations in society are embedded in language and social practices, and how discourse is employed to sustain or challenge dominant power structures (Foucault 1969). In social and political research, Foucault's discourse theory is frequently utilized to: (1) analyze how media and governmental institutions shape public opinion, (2) investigate how legal and policy frameworks are deployed to regulate society, and (3) critique how academic institutions establish "legitimate knowledge" while suppressing dissenting perspectives.

Within the context of this study, the discourse of antisemitism is not merely understood as a normative definition that delineates discrimination against Jewish communities but also as a political instrument leveraged to shape public opinion and regulate political narratives. This discourse serves as a mechanism for constraining criticism of Israel, particularly regarding its foreign policy and human rights record in Palestine. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse does not simply reflect reality; it actively constructs it through covert mechanisms of power embedded within language and institutional structures (Foucault 1972). By adopting a Foucauldian approach, this study will critically examine how the construction of antisemitism discourse operates as a means of social and political control in the global arena. For instance, the definition of antisemitism articulated by the IHRA is frequently employed to silence critiques of Israeli policies by conflating such critiques with anti-Jewish animus (Butler 2020). In several countries, the adoption of the IHRA definition has led to restrictions on academic and political freedoms, particularly targeting activists advocating for Palestinian rights (Meer 2022).

Furthermore, the instrumentalization of antisemitism discourse in global politics exemplifies how states and international actors manipulate ambiguous definitions to safeguard geopolitical interests. By monopolizing the definitional scope of antisemitism, certain states can exert control over discursive spaces and delineate the boundaries of legitimate international critique. This aligns with Foucault's concept of the "regime of truth," which posits that dominant power structures dictate what constitutes socially accepted truth (Foucault 1980). Accordingly, this study seeks to unveil how the power dynamics embedded within the discourse of antisemitism are mobilized to shape state policies and global political dynamics.

Results and Discussion

IHRA "Working Definition" on Antisemitism

The IHRA introduced its "working definition" of antisemitism in 2016 to provide a standardized guideline for identifying and addressing antisemitism globally. This definition states that antisemitism is "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities" (IHRA 2016). Additionally, the IHRA document provides 11 illustrative examples of antisemitism, seven of which are related to Israel, including "claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" and "applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation" (IHRA 2016). The adoption of this definition has led to widespread debate regarding its scope and implications, particularly concerning its impact on free speech and political criticism (Gould 2020).

One of the primary criticisms of the IHRA definition is its broad and ambiguous language, which some scholars argue allows for the conflation of legitimate political critique with antisemitism (Feldman 2018). Critics contend that including references to Israel within the definition creates an environment where discussions on Israeli policies, particularly regarding Palestine, are restricted (Butler 2020). This has raised concerns about the potential suppression of academic and activist spaces that engage in critical discourse about Israeli state policies (Meer 2022). Some institutions have reported self-censorship among academics and activists due to fears of being accused of antisemitism under this definition (Shaw 2021). Several legal experts argue that the IHRA definition lacks legal clarity and is subject to misinterpretation. The European Legal Support Center (ELSC) found that the definition has been used to justify disciplinary actions against individuals and organizations advocating for Palestinian rights, often without clear evidence of antisemitic intent (ELSC 2023). In Germany,

for example, cultural and academic events discussing Palestinian rights have been canceled under the pretext of adhering to the IHRA definition (Langer 2022).

Several governments and institutions have adopted the IHRA definition, citing the need to combat rising antisemitism. However, some governments and universities have resisted its adoption, arguing that it imposes limitations on academic freedom and political speech (Klug 2018). In the United Kingdom, over 100 university faculty members signed an open letter opposing its use in higher education, stating that it is incompatible with the principles of open debate and critical inquiry (Shaw 2021). Similarly, in the United States, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has warned that the definition could be weaponized to silence critics of Israel (ACLU 2024).

Comparing the IHRA definition with previous frameworks on antisemitism, scholars note that historical definitions focused primarily on direct discrimination, hate speech, and violence against Jewish individuals and communities (Bhandar 2020). The inclusion of state-related criticism within the IHRA framework marks a shift that has significant implications for international political discourse (Weiss 2019). This shift has also affected legislative discussions; in France, for instance, efforts to legally equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism have sparked controversy among lawmakers and civil society organizations (Levy 2021).

Despite these concerns, proponents argue that the IHRA definition provides a necessary tool to combat contemporary antisemitism, particularly as antisemitic incidents have risen in various parts of the world (Wistrich 2020). Reports from organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) indicate an increase in antisemitic hate crimes, leading to calls for stronger definitions and measures to combat discrimination (ADL 2021). However, the ongoing debates highlight the need for a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to defining and addressing antisemitism in a manner that balances both protection against hate speech and the preservation of democratic discourse.

Normalization of the IHRA Narrative and Impact

Since its introduction in 2016, the IHRA definition has been adopted by numerous Western governments, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Canada, and the European Union (IHRA 2016). In the UK, the government formally endorsed the IHRA definition in 2016, leading to its widespread implementation in universities and local councils. In 2020, the UK Secretary of Education warned universities that failure to adopt the definition could result in funding cuts (Shaw 2021).

Similarly, Germany has used the IHRA definition to justify restrictions on pro-Palestinian activism, including bans on events discussing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement (Langer 2022). Meanwhile, in the United States, the IHRA definition was incorporated into an Executive Order signed by President Donald Trump in 2019, instructing federal agencies to consider the definition when investigating allegations of antisemitism on college campuses (White House 2019). This decision has led to multiple complaints being filed against university students and faculty members critical of Israeli policies (ACLU 2024). The European Union and Canada have also integrated the IHRA definition into their policies on combating antisemitism, influencing how governments handle cases of alleged discrimination (European Commission 2021).

One of the most significant consequences of the widespread adoption of the IHRA definition has been its use to suppress academic discourse and activism related to Palestinian rights. In Germany, cultural institutions have canceled events featuring speakers critical of Israel, citing the IHRA definition as justification (Weiss 2019). In 2019, the Bundestag passed a resolution labeling the BDS movement as antisemitic, a move that was widely criticized by human rights organizations and legal scholars for restricting political expression (Bhandar 2020). In the UK, several university student unions have cited the IHRA definition to prevent pro-Palestinian groups from holding events on campus. In one case, the University of Leeds canceled a student-organized panel on Palestine after complaints that the event might violate the IHRA definition (Shaw 2021). In France, the government has pursued legal actions against activists advocating for Palestinian rights, with the court's ruling that calling for boycotts of Israeli goods constitutes a form of antisemitism under the IHRA framework (Levy 2021).

The normalization of the IHRA definition has also led to the marginalization of voices that challenge Israeli policies, including Jewish groups that oppose the occupation of Palestinian territories. Organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) in the United States and Jews for Justice for Palestinians in the UK have faced increasing pressure and exclusion from mainstream Jewish institutions due to their opposition to Israeli government policies (Gould 2020). In Germany, prominent Jewish intellectuals critical of Israel, such as historian Achille Mbembe and philosopher Judith Butler, have been labeled antisemitic based on the IHRA framework, despite their long-standing advocacy against racism and discrimination (Butler 2020). Additionally, international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which have published reports characterizing Israeli policies as apartheid, have faced significant backlash from pro-Israel groups invoking the IHRA definition to discredit their findings (Human Rights Watch 2021).

This trend illustrates how the IHRA narrative has been instrumentalized to shield Israel from scrutiny while delegitimizing dissenting perspectives, even among Jewish communities and respected human rights institutions (Feldman 2018).

The growing entrenchment of the IHRA definition within legal and political frameworks has raised concerns about its impact on free speech and the ability to engage in legitimate political debate (Foucault 1980). In Western democracies that have adopted the definition, individuals and organizations risk reputational and legal consequences for expressing views critical of Israel. This environment of self-censorship has particularly affected journalists, academics, and human rights defenders, many of whom report hesitating to address issues related to Israel-Palestine for fear of professional repercussions (Stern 2019). Moreover, as more institutions adopt the IHRA definition, its influence on policy-making continues to expand. Governments have used it as a basis for anti-BDS legislation, visa restrictions on pro-Palestinian activists, and the exclusion of NGOs critical of Israeli policies from official discussions on antisemitism (ADL 2021). These developments underscore the extent to which the IHRA narrative has been integrated into global governance structures, shaping not only how antisemitism is defined but also how political dissent is managed on the international stage (Judaken 2008).

JDA Responds to “the IHRA Definition”

In response to concerns regarding the IHRA definition, a group of international scholars developed the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) in 2021 as an alternative framework. The JDA seeks to provide a clearer and more contextually grounded approach to defining antisemitism, distinguishing between genuine antisemitic rhetoric and legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism (JDA 2021). Unlike the IHRA definition, the JDA explicitly states that criticism of Israeli policies, including Zionism as a political ideology, is not inherently antisemitic (Butler 2021). The declaration emphasizes that antisemitism involves discrimination, prejudice, hostility, or violence against Jews as Jews, while political critiques of Zionism and Israeli policies should not automatically be deemed antisemitic (Meer 2022).

The JDA was developed with reference to historical definitions of antisemitism and international human rights standards. It acknowledges that antisemitism has distinct characteristics but argues that combating it must be part of a broader effort to fight all forms of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination (Butler 2021). The JDA outlines a series of guidelines emphasizing that antisemitism should be understood as discrimination, prejudice, hostility, or violence against Jews as Jews,

without conflating this with political discourse on Israel-Palestine (JDA 2021). By doing so, the JDA attempts to depoliticize the definition of antisemitism and ensure that it is not used as a means of suppressing political dissent (Shaw 2021).

A key argument in favor of the JDA is that it protects freedom of expression while maintaining a firm stance against antisemitism. Legal scholars have pointed out that the IHRA definition's lack of precision creates legal uncertainties, whereas the JDA offers a more precise and applicable framework (Shaw 2022). According to Nathan (2021), the IHRA definition has often been misused to silence legitimate criticism of Israel, creating a chilling effect on free speech in academic and activist spaces. In contrast to the IHRA definition, which has been invoked to justify restrictions on pro-Palestinian activism, the JDA affirms the legitimacy of non-violent political actions such as boycotts and sanctions as forms of protest (Klug 2021). Finkelstein (2022) asserts that conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism risks undermining genuine efforts to combat anti-Jewish bigotry while simultaneously stifling necessary debates on human rights violations in Palestine.

One of the most significant contributions of the JDA is its set of fifteen guidelines that provide clarity on what constitutes antisemitic speech and behavior. For instance, it states that evidence-based criticism of Israel as a state, including its policies and practices, should not be categorized as antisemitic (Klug, 2021). This contrasts with the IHRA definition, which has been criticized for being used to delegitimize pro-Palestinian activism (Weiss, 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that the implementation of the IHRA definition has led to practical consequences for academic institutions and civil society. In the UK, universities that have adopted the IHRA definition have reported an increase in complaints against students and faculty members engaging in discussions about Israel-Palestine (Shaw 2021). Similarly, in Germany, cultural organizations have faced funding cuts for hosting discussions on Palestinian rights (Langer 2022). This divergence in acceptance reflects broader ideological and geopolitical divides regarding the intersection of antisemitism and Middle Eastern politics (Wistrich 2020). The JDA was developed partly to counter these effects, advocating for a more balanced and precise approach to defining antisemitism without infringing on legitimate political debate.

The ongoing debate between the IHRA and JDA definitions reflects broader tensions in discourse on antisemitism, political speech, and academic freedom. The emergence of the JDA highlights the ongoing struggle to define antisemitism in a way that protects Jewish communities while preserving space for legitimate political debate. The JDA offers an alternative that seeks to safeguard both the fight against antisemitism and the space for open political debate, aligning with Foucauldian perspectives on discourse as a tool for shaping knowledge and power structures. The discourse surrounding these definitions underscores the importance of recognizing power dynamics in shaping public narratives and policy decisions. The response to the JDA also illustrates broader tensions within discourse theory regarding who holds the authority to define terms with political significance (Foucault, 1980).

Discourse Theory Analysis

The discourse created by the IHRA definition systematically privileges certain interpretations of antisemitism while marginalizing others. As Foucault argues, discursive formations establish regimes of truth that determine what is considered legitimate knowledge (Foucault 1972). The broad inclusion of Israel-related criticism within the definition has led to institutional and governmental policies that regulate speech, particularly in academic and activist circles (Butler 2020). For instance, several universities in the United Kingdom and Germany have faced pressure to adopt the definition, resulting in the cancellation of events critical of Israeli policies (Shaw 2021). The adoption of the IHRA definition by multiple governments and institutions demonstrates how discourse becomes embedded within legal and political frameworks. The discourse is not neutral; it is actively shaped by political actors who benefit from its normalization (Gould 2020).

Foucault posits that discourse is not merely descriptive but actively constructs and enforces power relations (Foucault 1980). The IHRA definition exemplifies this by establishing a framework that aligns with specific political interests, particularly those of Israel and its allies. By equating certain critiques of Israeli policies with antisemitism, the definition serves to silence dissent and protect state actions from scrutiny (Klug 2021). This is a manifestation of what Foucault describes as “power/knowledge”—the ability to control narratives to maintain political authority (Foucault 1972).

The enforcement of the IHRA definition through legal and institutional mechanisms highlights how discourse translates into concrete expressions of power. Several European countries, including Germany and France, have used the definition to justify the banning of pro-Palestinian

activism and to discipline individuals who express critical views on Israel (Langer 2022). This demonstrates the intersection between discourse and institutional authority, where language becomes a tool for governance and suppression. Furthermore, the IHRA definition is leveraged to delegitimize political movements advocating for Palestinian rights. Organizations such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement have been labeled antisemitic under the IHRA framework, despite their emphasis on human rights and international law (Bhandar 2020). This illustrates how discourse functions as a mechanism of exclusion, delineating who is allowed to participate in public debates and who is rendered illegitimate (Foucault 1969).

The use of discourse as an instrument of power is further reinforced through the media and public discourse. Mainstream media outlets often adopt the IHRA framework uncritically, shaping public opinion and restricting alternative viewpoints (Butler 2020). This dynamic aligns with Foucault's notion that power operates through networks of knowledge production, controlling the parameters of acceptable debate (Foucault 1972).

Ultimately, the IHRA definition serves as a powerful case study in how discourse operates as an instrument of power. It establishes dominant narratives, aligns institutional policies with specific political interests, and marginalizes opposing viewpoints. In doing so, it exemplifies Foucault's broader argument that power is deeply embedded in language, knowledge, and institutions, shaping the way societies interpret and engage with complex political issues (Foucault 1980).

Critics argue that the IHRA definition's dominance has a chilling effect on political discourse, as individuals and organizations fear accusations of antisemitism for expressing critical views on Israel (Meer 2022). This reinforces the Foucauldian concept of discourse policing, where dominant narratives constrain the scope of permissible speech (Foucault 1969). Thus, the IHRA definition functions as a form of discursive control that shapes global understandings of antisemitism and limits alternative perspectives.

Normalization of Meaning Concept

The concept of normalization, as described by Foucault, refers to the process by which certain ideas and behaviors become accepted as the standard (Foucault 1979). The IHRA definition illustrates this by gradually embedding its discourse on antisemitism into mainstream policy and legal frameworks. Normalization occurs through repeated institutional reinforcement. For example, the European Parliament and the United

States Congress have both endorsed the IHRA definition, further embedding it within international governance structures (Levy 2021). As Foucault notes, normalization is a key mechanism of power that dictates what is considered normal and what is considered deviant in a given society (Foucault 1979). By institutionalizing the IHRA definition, critiques of Israel that fall outside its parameters become marginalized, leading to a shift in political discourse that favors Israeli state narratives (Klug 2018).

The normalization of the IHRA definition within Western political structures also reflects the broader dynamic of power in global politics. By promoting a specific discourse on antisemitism, Israel and its allies influence international institutions, shaping policies that align with their strategic interests (Shaw, 2021). This aligns with Foucault's assertion that power is not merely exercised through coercion but is embedded within the systems of knowledge that govern societies (Foucault 1980). The impact of this power dynamic extends to international diplomatic relations. Countries that refuse to adopt the IHRA definition, such as South Africa and Norway, face diplomatic pressure from Western states advocating for its institutionalization (Levy 2021). This reinforces the idea that discourse is not just an abstract concept but a concrete mechanism for shaping geopolitical realities and aligning international actors with dominant power structures (Gould 2020).

JDA and BDS as Exclusion of Alternative Discourses

Foucault's concept of discourse highlights the power structures that determine what is considered legitimate knowledge and what is excluded from mainstream narratives (Foucault 1980). Within the context of antisemitism discourse, the IHRA definition has become a dominant framework that delegitimizes alternative narratives such as the JDA and movements like BDS. These alternative frameworks attempt to separate antisemitism from political critique of Israel; however, they are frequently marginalized or dismissed as extremist positions (Klug 2021). This exclusion reflects the way dominant discourse operates to maintain power by defining the limits of acceptable debate (Foucault 1972).

One of the key mechanisms of exclusion is the way institutions and governments adopt the IHRA definition while refusing to engage with alternative perspectives. In the United Kingdom, for instance, numerous universities and public institutions have endorsed the IHRA definition, effectively silencing critical discussions on Israeli policies for fear of being labeled antisemitic (Shaw 2021). Similarly, in Germany, cultural and academic events discussing Palestinian rights have been canceled under the pretext of combating antisemitism, illustrating how exclusion

operates through institutional mechanisms (Langer 2022). Another way exclusion manifests is through political and legal repercussions. Advocates of the JDA and BDS movements have been targeted with legal sanctions, workplace discrimination, and social ostracization. In France, for example, activists promoting a boycott of Israeli goods have faced legal prosecution under laws aimed at preventing discrimination, despite their claims that such actions constitute a legitimate form of political protest (Levy 2021). The suppression of these alternative narratives is not merely a matter of differing opinions but rather a strategic mechanism to maintain the hegemony of the IHRA discourse.

The media also plays a crucial role in the exclusion of alternative discourses. Foucault emphasized that power is exercised not just through direct repression but through the production of knowledge and norms (Foucault 1980). News outlets and digital platforms frequently frame critiques of Israel as being inherently antisemitic, creating a climate where alternative voices are systematically dismissed (Butler, 2020). This aligns with Foucault's assertion that those who control discourse also control the boundaries of what can be said and thought in public spaces.

Thus, the exclusion of alternative discourses is not accidental but a deliberate function of power that serves to maintain the IHRA definition as the uncontested standard. By framing opposing views as illegitimate or dangerous, the discourse surrounding antisemitism is shaped in a way that aligns with specific political interests while undermining open and democratic debate.

Control Over Truth Concept

The ability to define antisemitism through the IHRA framework exemplifies what Foucault described as the power to control truth (Foucault 1980). Truth, according to Foucault, is not an objective reality but a product of power relations that determine what is considered legitimate knowledge. By establishing the IHRA definition as the dominant framework, pro-Israel lobby groups and allied governments have positioned themselves as the arbiters of truth regarding antisemitism, thereby influencing public perception and policy decisions (Gould 2020).

This control over truth is evident in the way legal and academic institutions enforce the IHRA definition. In the United States, state-level legislation has been introduced to penalize individuals and organizations that critique Israel under the guise of combating antisemitism (ACLU 2024). Similarly, in Germany, public officials and university administrators have explicitly stated that rejecting the IHRA definition or supporting BDS is grounds for exclusion from public discourse (Langer 2022). These measures align

with Foucault's argument that institutions serve as mechanisms for producing and maintaining dominant knowledge structures. Another manifestation of control over truth is the securitization of antisemitism discourse. Governments and international organizations often link critiques of Israel to national security threats, thereby justifying restrictive policies against activists and scholars (Stern 2019). By framing dissenting perspectives as dangerous, these institutions ensure that the IHRA definition remains unchallenged while simultaneously delegitimizing alternative viewpoints.

Furthermore, the monopolization of the antisemitism discourse affects policymaking and diplomatic relations. Countries that refuse to adopt the IHRA definition face political pressure and accusations of enabling antisemitism, illustrating how truth is constructed and enforced through international power dynamics (Meer 2022). The European Union, for instance, has integrated the IHRA framework into its policy guidelines, demonstrating how dominant discourses become institutionalized through geopolitical influence (Weiss 2019). Social media and digital platforms further reinforce the control over truth by regulating what content is deemed acceptable. Facebook and Twitter have implemented policies that align with the IHRA definition, resulting in the removal of content critical of Israel while allowing narratives that conform to the dominant discourse (Butler 2020). This reflects Foucault's idea that discourse is not just about what is said but also about who has the authority to speak and be heard.

In conclusion, the adoption of the IHRA definition illustrates how discourse functions as a tool of power, shaping public knowledge and suppressing alternative interpretations. By controlling the discourse on antisemitism, Israel and its allies have ensured that their perspective remains dominant, limiting the space for critical debate and alternative understandings. This aligns with Foucault's assertion that power operates through discourse by establishing the boundaries of truth and determining what is permissible within a given social and political context.

Conclusion

Who has the right to define antisemitism? This authority determines the discourse that shapes political narratives, legal frameworks, and academic freedom. From a Foucauldian perspective, the struggle over this definition exemplifies the ways in which power operates through discourse, shaping knowledge and regulating what can be said, by whom, and in what context.

The emergence of the IHRA “working definition” has positioned governments, institutions, and political actors as the primary arbiters of what constitutes antisemitism. Its adoption by various countries and organizations has led to its institutionalization as the dominant framework, reinforcing state and policy-driven narratives that often align with geopolitical interests. The IHRA definition has been criticized for conflating legitimate political criticism of Israel with antisemitism, raising concerns over the suppression of free speech and academic inquiry. In response, alternative frameworks such as the JDA have sought to challenge the hegemony of the IHRA definition, advocating for a more precise distinction between antisemitism and political critique. This contestation reveals the Foucauldian dynamic of resistance within discourse, where power is not only exerted from above but is also contested from below by scholars, activists, and civil society.

The debate over defining antisemitism is not merely about semantics but about the broader mechanisms through which discourse structures power relations. The enforcement of the IHRA definition through governmental and institutional mechanisms exemplifies how discourse can be used to regulate speech, exclude dissenting perspectives, and reinforce existing power structures. By shaping legal and institutional policies, dominant narratives define the limits of acceptable debate, often silencing alternative voices and perspectives.

Ultimately, the authority to define antisemitism is not held by any single entity, but rather is a contested space shaped by competing political, legal, and academic forces. While governments and international organizations have sought to institutionalize definitions, such as the IHRA framework, civil society, scholars, and activists continue to challenge and negotiate its boundaries. This ongoing debate underscores the necessity of maintaining an open and inclusive discourse on antisemitism—one that acknowledges the role of power in shaping definitions while ensuring that efforts to combat discrimination do not undermine democratic freedoms and human rights.

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