

# 128 scholars warn: ‘Don’t trap the United Nations in a vague and weaponized definition of antisemitism’

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As scholars specializing in Antisemitism, Holocaust Studies, Modern Jewish History and related fields, we witness with growing concern politically motivated efforts to instrumentalize the fight against antisemitism at and against the United Nations.

Israeli UN Ambassador Gilad Erdan has spearheaded these efforts. In his persistent attempts to undercut the Palestinians and to shield the Israeli government from international criticism, Mr. Erdan has gone so far as to denounce the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) as “anti-Semitic”.

Beyond such defamation, Mr. Erdan now seeks to fundamentally change the rules of the game by pressing the UN to adopt the [“Working Definition of Antisemitism”](#) of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA WDA).

We find this definition deeply problematic. Vague and incoherent, the IHRA WDA does not satisfy the basic requirements of a good definition. Rather than ensuring greater clarity, the IHRA WDA has been generating confusion about what constitutes antisemitism.

As a result, the IHRA WDA has become highly controversial and contested, including among Jews. Its weaknesses prompted 350 leading scholars in Antisemitism, Holocaust Studies and related fields to endorse another more robust definition, the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#).

The divisive and polarizing effect of the IHRA WDA flows from eleven “contemporary examples of antisemitism” attached to it, seven of which relate to Israel. Ample evidence shows that these examples are being weaponized to discredit and silence legitimate criticism of Israel’s policies as antisemitism. Among those denouncing such misuse is Kenneth Stern, the lead author of the IHRA WDA. More recently, Antony Lerman, former head of the World Jewish Congress’s Institute of Jewish Affairs, has sharply criticized the IHRA WDA for several flaws, including its focus on the so-called “new antisemitism” linked to Israel, at the expense of attention to virulent forms of antisemitism now on the rise.

One of the examples of the IHRA WDA says: “Applying double standards by requiring of [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.” This example is particularly prone to political abuse at the UN, as it can easily be invoked to label any UN resolution that criticizes Israel as anti-Semitic.

Let us be clear: we wholeheartedly welcome the commitment of the UN to fight antisemitism and commend the UN for its vital efforts in this regard. What we object to and strongly warn against is that the UN would jeopardize this essential fight and harm its universal mission to promote human rights by endorsing a politicized definition that is instrumentalized to deter free speech and to shield the Israeli government from accountability for its actions.

We know that the IHRA WDA has been adopted by multiple governments, mainly in Europe and the US. That in itself is problematic. However, if the UN were to endorse the IHRA WDA, the harm would be exponentially greater.

The Israeli government would be emboldened and enabled to escalate its campaign against UN bodies and experts, by weaponizing and leveraging the IHRA WDA as a UN standard ‘establishing’ that UNRWA, the ICC, the Human Rights Council and bodies like the Commission of Inquiry are antisemitic. By extension, human rights defenders and organizations challenging Israel’s violations would be fully exposed to smear campaigns based on bad-faith allegations of antisemitism, harming their freedom of expression and other fundamental rights protected and promoted by the UN.

The UN’s mission and mandate rely upon serious debate about human rights concerns. Adoption of the IHRA WDA would transform any factual discussion about Israeli violations and accountability into a fraught debate about alleged antisemitism. This could also weaken the UN’s ability to act as a neutral mediator in Israel and Palestine.

The weaknesses and instrumentalization of the IHRA WDA have direct implications for the UN’s ability to fight antisemitism and all other forms of racism on universal grounds. UN High Representative Miguel Moratinos has been tasked by the UN to develop an “enhanced system-wide response [to antisemitism] based on a human rights approach”. Apart from contradicting a human rights approach, the IHRA WDA would inevitably politicize that response and thus compromise the UN’s ability to effectively fight antisemitism.

Instead of formally identifying itself with a vague and divisive definition that has been hijacked to shield the Israeli government, the UN should enhance its fight against antisemitism by relying on its universal human rights instruments, in accordance with its Charter. When seeking guidance, it should be free to consult a variety of resources, including the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism.

We welcome the recent [report](#) by Prof. E. Tendayi Achiume, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, in which she “cautions against reliance on the IHRA WDA as a guiding instrument for and at the UN and its constituent entities” and calls on “UN member states and UN officials [to] firmly reject and act responsibly to end the political instrumentalization of the fight against antisemitism”.

We urge UN member states and UN officials to act upon Special Rapporteur Achiume’s warning and call and stand ready to support the UN in its steps forward.

**Meir Amor**, Dr., Department of Sociology and Anthropology (retired), Concordia University, Montreal  
**Ofer Ashkenazi**, Professor, Director The Richard Koebner Minerva Center for German History, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Aleida Assmann**, Professor of English Literature and Cultural Theory, Konstanz University

**Jan Assmann**, Professor, Egyptologist and Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg

**Leora Auslander**, Arthur and Joann Rasmussen Professor of Western Civilization in the College and Professor of European Social History, Department of History, University of Chicago

**Angelika Bammer**, Professor of Comparative Literature, Affiliate Faculty of Jewish Studies, Emory University

**Omer Bartov**, Samuel P. Isidor Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Department of History, Faculty Fellow, Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, Brown University

**Moshe Behar**, Dr., Arabic & Middle Eastern Studies, School of Arts, Languages & Cultures, The University of Manchester

**Peter Beinart**, Professor of Journalism and Political Science, The City University of New York (CUNY); Editor at large, Jewish Currents

**Joel Beinin**, Donald J. McLachlan Professor of History and Professor of Middle East History, Emeritus, Stanford University

**Elissa Bemporad**, Jerry and William Ungar Chair in East European Jewish History and the Holocaust; Professor of History, Queens College and The City University of New York (CUNY)

**Doris Bergen**, Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor of Holocaust Studies, Department of History and Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Toronto

**Werner Bergmann**, Professor Emeritus Dr., Sociologist, Center for Research on Antisemitism, Technische Universität Berlin

**Michael Berkowitz**, Professor of Modern Jewish History, Department of Hebrew & Jewish Studies, University College London

**Lila Corwin Berman**, Murray Friedman Chair of American Jewish History, Temple University

**David Biale**, Emanuel Ringelblum Distinguished Professor Emeritus, UC Davis

**Frank Biess**, Professor of Modern European History, University of California-San Diego

**Daniel Blatman**, Professor Emeritus, Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Donald Bloxham**, Richard Pares Professor of History, University of Edinburgh

**Daniel Boyarin**, Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture Emeritus, UC Berkeley

**Micha Brumlik**, Professor Dr., fmr. Director of Fritz Bauer Institut-Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust, Frankfurt am Main

**Jose Brunner**, Professor Emeritus, Buchmann Faculty of Law and Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science, Tel Aviv University

**Bryan Cheyette**, Professor and Chair in Modern Literature and Culture, University of Reading

**Geoffrey Claussen**, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Lori and Eric Sklut Scholar in Jewish Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Elon University

**Stephen Clingman**, Distinguished University Professor, Department of English, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

**Raya Cohen**, Dr., fmr. lecturer Department of Jewish History, Tel Aviv University and Department of Sociology, University of Naples Federico II

**Alon Confino**, Pen Tishkach Chair of Holocaust Studies, Professor of History and Jewish Studies, Director Institute for Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

**Sebastian Conrad**, Professor of Global and Postcolonial History, Freie Universität Berlin

**Frank Dabba Smith**, Rabbi Dr., Leo Baeck College

**Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi**, Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Hasia R. Diner**, Professor Emerita, New York University

**Monique Eckmann**, Professor Emerita, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Western Switzerland (HES-SO), Geneva; fmr. member Swiss delegation to the IHRA (2004-2018)

**Vincent Engel**, Professor, University of Louvain, UCLouvain

**Jennifer Evans**, Professor, Department of History, Carleton University; Member College of New Scholars, Royal Society of Canada

**David Feldman**, Professor of History, Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, University of London

**Anna Foa**, fmr. Associate Professor, Department of History, Cultures, Religions, Sapienza University of Rome

**Ute Frevert**, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin

**Efrat Gal-Ed**, Professor Dr., Institute of Jewish Studies, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

**Katharina Galor**, Hirschfeld Senior Lecturer in Judaic Studies, Brown University

**Alexandra Garbarini**, Charles R. Keller Professor of History, Faculty Affiliate in Jewish Studies, Williams College

**Sander Gilman**, Distinguished Professor of the Liberal Arts and Sciences Emeritus, Emory University

**Shai Ginsburg**, Associate Professor, Chair of the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and Faculty Member of the Center for Jewish Studies, Duke University

**Amos Goldberg**, Professor, The Jonah M. Machover Chair in Holocaust Studies, Head of the Avraham Harman Research Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Harvey Goldberg**, Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Sylvie-Anne Goldberg**, Professor, Jewish Culture and History, Head of Jewish Studies at the Advanced School of Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris

**Svenja Goltermann**, Professor Dr., Historisches Seminar, University of Zurich

**Dorota Glowacka**, Professor, Humanities, University of King's College, Halifax

**Leonard Grob**, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Fairleigh Dickinson University

**Jeffrey Grossman**, Associate Professor and Chair Germanic Languages and Literatures, Member Program in Jewish Studies, University of Virginia

**Atina Grossmann**, Professor of History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, The Cooper Union, New York

**Wolf Gruner**, Shapell-Guerin Chair in Jewish Studies, Professor of History and Founding Director of the USC Dornsife Center for Advanced Genocide Research, University of Southern California

**Ruth HaCohen**, Artur Rubinstein Professor Emerita of Musicology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Aaron J. Hahn Tapper**, Professor, Mae and Benjamin Swig Chair in Jewish Studies, Director of the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice, University of San Francisco

**Anna Hajkova**, Associate Professor of Modern Continental European History, Warwick University

**Rachel Havrelock**, Professor of English and Jewish Studies, University of Illinois, Chicago

**Elizabeth Heineman**, Professor of History and of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies, University of Iowa

**Deborah Hertz**, Wouk Chair in Modern Jewish Studies, University of California, San Diego

**Dagmar Herzog**, Distinguished Professor of History and Daniel Rose Faculty Scholar Graduate Center, The City University of New York (CUNY)

**Dafna Hirsch**, Dr., Department of Sociology, Political Science and Communication, The Open University of Israel

**Marianne Hirschberg**, Professor, Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Kassel

**Jill Jacobs**, Rabbi, Executive Director, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, New York

**Uffa Jensen**, Professor Dr., Center for Research on Antisemitism, Technische Universität, Berlin

**Jonathan Judaken**, Professor, Spence L. Wilson Chair in the Humanities, Rhodes College

**Irene Kacandes**, The Dartmouth Professor of German Studies and Comparative Literature, Dartmouth University

**Marion Kaplan**, Professor Emerita of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University

**Brian Klug**, Hon. Fellow in Social Philosophy, Campion Hall, University of Oxford; Emeritus Fellow, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford; Hon. Fellow, Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations, University of Southampton

**Thomas A. Kohut**, Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Professor of History, Williams College

**Alexander Korb**, Dr., Associate Professor in Modern European History, Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Leicester

**Tony Kushner**, Professor, Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations, University of Southampton

**Dominick LaCapra**, Professor Emeritus of History, Cornell University

**Ferenc Laczó**, Assistant Professor in European History, Maastricht University

**Ben Lapp**, Associate Professor of History, Montclair State University, New Jersey

**Nitzan Lebovic**, Professor, Department of History, Chair of Holocaust Studies and Ethical Values, Lehigh University

**Claudia Lenz**, Professor of Social Science, Chair for prevention of racism and antisemitism, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, Oslo

**Mark Levene**, Dr., Emeritus Fellow, University of Southampton and Parkes Centre for Jewish/non-Jewish Relations

**Giovanni Levi**, Professor Emeritus of Modern History, Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
**Simon Levis Sullam**, Associate Professor of Modern History, Ca' Foscari University of Venice  
**Hanno Loewy**, Director of the Jewish Museum Hohenems, Austria  
**Ian S. Lustick**, Bess W. Heyman Chair Emeritus, Department of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania  
**Sergio Luzzatto**, Emiliana Pasca Noether Chair in Modern Italian History, Department of History, University of Connecticut  
**Shaul Magid**, Professor of Jewish Studies, Dartmouth College  
**Avishai Margalit**, Professor Emeritus in Philosophy, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
**Jessica Marglin**, Associate Professor of Religion, Law and History, Ruth Ziegler Early Career Chair in Jewish Studies, University of Southern California  
**David Mednicoff**, Associate Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and Public Policy and Chair Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
**Eva Menasse**, Novelist, Berlin  
**Paul Mendes-Flohr**, Professor Emeritus of History and Religious Thought, University of Chicago; Professor Emeritus at the Divinity School, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
**Leslie Morris**, Professor of German and Jewish Studies, Chair Department of German, Nordic, Slavic & Dutch, University of Minnesota  
**Dirk Moses**, Professor, Anne & Bernard Spitzer Chair in International Relations, The City College of New York (CCNY)  
**Samuel Moyn**, Henry R. Luce Professor of Jurisprudence and Professor of History, Yale University  
**Harriet L. Murav**, Professor, Center for Advanced Study, Catherine and Bruce Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Comparative and World Literature, University of Illinois  
**Susan Neiman**, Professor Dr., Philosopher, Director of the Einstein Forum, Potsdam  
**Adi Ophir**, Professor Emeritus, Tel Aviv University; Visiting Professor, Brown University, the Cogut Institute for the Humanities and the Center for Middle East Studies  
**Atalia Omer**, Professor of Religion, Conflict and Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and the Dunphy Visiting Professor of Religion, Violence, and Peacebuilding at Harvard Divinity School  
**Thomas Pegelow Kaplan**, Professor of History, Louis P. Singer Endowed Chair in Jewish History, University of Colorado Boulder  
**Robert Jan van Pelt**, University Professor, School of Architecture, University of Waterloo  
**Derek Penslar**, William Lee Frost Professor of Jewish History, Harvard University  
**Andrea Pető**, Professor, Central European University (CEU), Vienna; CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest  
**Alessandro Portelli**, fmr. Professor of Anglo-American Literature, Sapienza University of Rome  
**David Ranan**, Dr., Political Scientist and Writer, London/Berlin  
**James Renton**, Professor of History, Co-Director, International Centre on Racism, Edge Hill University  
**Na'ama Rokem**, Associate Professor, Director Joyce Z. And Jacob Greenberg Center for Jewish Studies, University of Chicago  
**Mark Roseman**, Distinguished Professor in History, Pat M. Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies, Indiana University  
**Göran Rosenberg**, Writer and Journalist, Sweden  
**Ishay Rosen-Zvi**, Professor of Talmud and Jewish Philosophy, Department of Jewish Philosophy, Tel Aviv University  
**Michael Rothberg**, 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies, UCLA  
**Raz Segal**, Associate Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Endowed Professor in the Study of Modern Genocide, Stockton  
**Joshua Shanes**, Professor and Director of the Arnold Center for Israel Studies, College of Charleston  
**David Shulman**, Professor Emeritus, Department of Asian Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Dmitry Shumsky**, Professor, Israel Goldstein Chair in the History of Zionism and the New Yishuv, Head of the Institute of History, Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Tamir Sorek**, Liberal Arts Professor of Middle East History and Jewish Studies, Penn State University

**David Sorkin**, Lucy G. Moses Professor of Modern Jewish History, Department of History, Yale University

**Stefanie Schüler-Springorum**, Professor Dr., Director of the Center for Research on Antisemitism, Technische Universität Berlin

**Michael Stanislawski**, Nathan J. Miller Professor of Jewish History, Department of History, Columbia University

**Michael P. Steinberg**, Barnaby Conrad and Mary Critchfield Keeney Professor of History; Professor of Music and German Studies, Brown University

**Lior Sternfeld**, Associate Professor of History and Jewish Studies, Penn State University

**Mira Sucharov**, Professor and Associate Chair, Department of Political Science, Carleton University

**Kylie Thomas**, Dr., Senior Researcher, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam

**Anya Topolski**, Associate Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy, Radboud University, Nijmegen

**Barry Trachtenberg**, Associate Professor, Rubin Presidential Chair of Jewish History, Wake Forest University

**Enzo Traverso**, Susan and Barton Winokur Professor in the Humanities, Department of History, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

**Peter Ullrich**, Dr. Dr., Senior Researcher, Fellow at the Center for Research on Antisemitism, Technische Universität Berlin

**Alana M. Vincent**, Associate Professor, Religious Studies, Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University

**Anika Walke**, Georgie W. Lewis Career Development Professor and Associate Professor of History, Washington University in St. Louis

**Dov Waxman**, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Chair in Israel Studies, University of California Los Angeles (UCLA)

**Sebastian Wogenstein**, Associate Professor of German, Hebrew and Judaic Studies, University of Connecticut

**Moshe Zimmermann**, Professor Emeritus, The Richard Koebner Minerva Center for German History, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Steven J. Zipperstein**, Daniel E. Koshland Professor in Jewish Culture and History, Stanford University

**Moshe Zuckermann**, Professor Emeritus of History and Philosophy, Tel Aviv University