

# Ontario parliament to ban criticism of Israel under guise of combating anti-Semitism

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**7 March 2020**

In a reactionary move that targets left-wing organizations and free speech in general, Ontario's provincial parliament has voted to move forward with legislation that would delegitimize and potentially criminalize all criticism of Israel and its far-right Israeli government by qualifying it as "anti-Semitic."

Bill 168—which is backed by Ontario's Conservative government, the New Democratic Party (NDP) official opposition, and the Liberals—mandates the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of anti-Semitism as a "guide" for government policies and public institutions.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition equates criticism of Zionism with anti-Semitism. The 11 examples the IHRA has attached to its definition include criticism of the establishment of Israel "as a racist endeavour," applying "double standards" to Israel by "requiring of it a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation," and comparing the Israeli government's policies with those of the Nazis. The scope of the working definition is so broad that even Kenneth Stern, a US academic who helped draft it, has rejected its use as a legal instrument.

On February 27, the Ontario legislature voted 55-0 to refer the bill to Third Reading, the final stage of consideration before it is passed into law. Tory MPP (Member of Provincial Parliament) Robin Martin, a co-sponsor of the bill, made clear its anti-democratic intent by smearing recent pro-Palestinian protests at Toronto's York University as anti-Semitic in arguing for Bill 168's adoption. The York protests were mounted against a meeting last November that featured Israeli army reservists as speakers and sought to whitewash the crimes of the Israeli Defence Forces. The meeting was supported by the Jewish Defence League, which even the US FBI has been compelled to designate a terrorist organization.

The social-democratic NDP is playing a particularly foul role in legitimizing this frontal assault on democratic rights. Not a single NDP MPP opposed Bill 168 in the

parliamentary debate or vote. Moreover, those who did speak sought to allay the entirely justified concerns that Bill 168 will be used against left-wing groups and opponents of Canadian imperialism's close alliance with the right-wing Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu. Bill 168 is not intended to be legally binding, asserted NDP MPP John Vanthof, who went on to claim the legislation "should function as an expression of our shared commitment to fight anti-Semitism."

The only "shared commitment" within Canada's ruling establishment is to prevent any public criticism of its aggressive imperialist policies in alliance with Washington in the Middle East. A key plank of this is Ottawa's staunch support for the Israeli government's dispossession and oppression of the Palestinian people.

Regardless of whether the hard-right Conservative Stephen Harper or the Liberal Justin Trudeau has occupied 22 Sussex Drive, successive federal governments have rejected any criticism of Tel Aviv's illegal settlement program in the West Bank, its discrimination and racist policies aimed at Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, and its frequent military onslaughts against the defenceless Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip. Like Washington, Canada's close military-strategic ally, Ottawa views Israel as a key ally in the Middle East for pushing back Iranian influence and consolidating US hegemony over the energy-rich and strategically critical region. Canada pursues this policy not as a "vassal" of the United States, as many pseudo-left groups claim, but as an imperialist power that calculates it can best realize its own predatory interests by bolstering US hegemony against its main rivals, Russia and China.

The Trudeau government paved the way for the introduction of Bill 168 by adopting the IHRA working definition on anti-Semitism last June in a strategy document on combating racism. Underlining the authoritarian intentions of this move, Liberal MP Anthony Housefather encouraged local communities to employ the IHRA definition when determining whether groups or individuals critical of Israel should be allowed to use their facilities.

Less than two weeks prior to the Ontario legislature's vote on Bill 168, the Trudeau government sent a letter to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague to oppose it investigating Israeli war crimes. A report released by ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda in December called for an investigation into disproportionate attacks by Israeli soldiers, willful killings, and the infliction of serious injuries on Palestinians. Canada's letter, employing typical bullying imperialist language, warned the court that Canada's annual contribution is more than C\$10 million, before affirming the ICC has no jurisdiction to rule on the case because Palestine is not a state.

The universal support for the IHRA definition within ruling circles is part of a wider attack on dissent and social opposition. Those who protest against Canada's outrageous support for, and complicity in, Israeli war crimes will be branded as "anti-Semites." Meanwhile, right-wing and even far-right forces are being given free rein to whip up Islamophobia, justify imperialist war crimes, and incite racism and xenophobia against immigrants.

This is part of an international process. The IHRA working definition was a key instrument in the hands of the Blairite wing of the British Labour Party and its right-wing allies in a sustained and ongoing smear campaign that labeled Jeremy Corbyn and others within the Labour Party critical of Israel as anti-Semites. Led by figures with close ties to Israeli and US intelligence, this campaign has served to delegitimize any criticism of Israeli policy and British imperialism, and shift politics further right.

Canada's ruling elite is pursuing similar goals. Alongside its push for Bill 168, the right-wing populist government of Doug Ford has demanded that all universities and colleges adopt a "free speech" policy if they wish to continue receiving provincial funding at current levels. This initiative is aimed at pressuring university administrations into providing a platform for far-right speakers on campuses, including the likes of fascist ex-Rebel Media journalist Faith Goldy and Trump ally Milo Yiannopolous.

While such reactionary figures are to be welcomed in the name of "free speech," left-wing criticism or dissent is being suppressed. Three years ago, Ontario became the first Canadian province to publicly condemn the Boycott, Disinvestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement on the spurious grounds that because it is anti-Zionist it is anti-Semitic. This action was meant to encourage university and college administrations to bar access to pro-BDS activists.

The BDS campaign promotes Palestinian nationalism and the misguided claim, as manifested in its call for a boycott of all Israeli academics and artists, that the entire Israeli population is responsible for the criminal actions of the Israeli government.

The Ontario legislature's unanimous vote in favour of Bill 168 underscores that Canada's pro-Israel policy enjoys the support of the entire political establishment. However, opposition to the attempt to ban entirely legitimate left-wing criticisms of militarism and war are growing. More than 400 academics from across the country have signed an open letter demanding that Bill 168 be rejected. The letter explains the grave consequences for democratic rights, including academic freedom and freedom of speech, if criticism of Israeli government policy is prohibited.

In an article for *University Affairs* magazine, Jeffrey Sachs pointed out that the introduction of the IHRA working definition in the United States has resulted in a sharp rise in legal proceedings against academics and student groups critical of Israeli government policy. The US Department of Education has already initiated investigations into Duke University, Williams College, and Rutgers University with the claim that they allegedly enabled anti-Semitism on their campuses. In Canada, the IHRA working definition has been adopted by student governments at Ryerson and McGill universities since 2017, opening the door to their preventing left-wing students from accessing meeting rooms and other resources.

Efforts to encourage cities to adopt the IHRA working definition have also met with resistance. In Montreal, a motion to have the City Council approve the definition was withdrawn in January after Independent Jewish Voices (IJV), which is associated with the BDS movement, and the Canadian Palestinian Foundation campaigned against it. IJV was also involved in successful counter campaigns in Vancouver and Calgary, with hundreds of people contacting their city councils to oppose adoption of the IHRA definition.

*The author also recommends:*

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