

## **To Europe We Say: Don't conflate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism**

19 November 2018

In the context of its EU Presidency, the Austrian government will hold a high-level conference on November 21st, titled "Europe Beyond Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism – Securing Jewish Life in Europe."

We fully embrace and support the EU's uncompromising fight against anti-Semitism. The rise of anti-Semitism worries us. As we know from history, it has often signaled future disasters to all mankind. The rise of anti-Semitism constitutes a real threat and should be a major concern in contemporary European politics.

However, the EU also stands for human rights and has to protect them as forcefully as it fights anti-Semitism. This fight against anti-Semitism should not be instrumentalized to suppress legitimate criticism of Israel's occupation and severe violations of Palestinian human rights.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was to address the conference in Austria, until he cancelled to stabilize his government. He has worked hard to conflate criticism of the state of Israel with anti-Semitism.

To our great concern, we see this conflation also in the official announcement of the conference by the Austrian government. It says: "Very often, anti-Semitism is expressed through exaggerated and disproportionate criticism of the state of Israel."

These words echo the anti-Semitism definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Several examples of contemporary anti-Semitism attached to this definition, relate to harsh critique of Israel. As a result, the definition can be dangerously instrumentalized to afford Israel immunity against criticism for grave and wide-spread violations of human rights and international law – criticism which is considered legitimate when directed at other countries. This has a chilling effect on any critique of Israel.

Moreover, the conference announcement identifies anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. However, Zionism, like all other modern Jewish movements in the 20th century, was harshly opposed by many Jews, as well as by non-Jews who were not anti-Semitic. Many victims of the Holocaust opposed Zionism. On the other hand, many anti-Semites supported Zionism. It is nonsensical and inappropriate to identify anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

We must also not forget that the state of Israel has been an occupying power for more than 50 years. Millions of Palestinians under occupation lack basic rights, freedom and dignity. As the Israeli occupation is now transforming into annexation, it is essential, more than ever, that Europe rejects efforts to restrict free speech and to silence criticism of Israel on the false ground of equating it with anti-Semitism.

Europe also needs to do so for the credibility and effectiveness of its fight against anti-Semitism. Extending this fight to protect the state of Israel from criticism feeds misconceptions that Jews equal Israel – and are thus responsible for what Israel does.

**As Israeli scholars, most of whom research and teach Jewish history, we say to Europe:**

**Relentlessly fight anti-Semitism to protect Jewish life in Europe, and allow it to thrive. Do so while maintaining a clear distinction between criticism of the state of Israel, harsh as it may be, and anti-Semitism. Don't mix anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. And preserve free speech for those who reject the Israeli occupation and insist that it ends.**

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Professor **Hannan Hever**, Department of Comparative Literature and the Judaic Studies Program, Yale University.

Professor **Eva Illouz**, Department of Sociology, Hebrew University Jerusalem; former president of Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem.

**Daniel Karavan**, sculptor, creator of the Memorial to Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism in Berlin (2012) and the Way of Human Rights at Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (1989-93); Israel Prize recipient (1977).

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