

Call by scholars on global leaders at Malmö Forum on Combating Antisemitism

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We issue this call as scholars working in antisemitism studies and related fields.

On 13-14 October 2021, the leaders of the European Union and the United Nations and heads of state and government from many countries will meet at the [Malmö International Forum](#) on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven convenes this forum 21 years after the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, which resulted in the [Stockholm Declaration](#), the founding document of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

We welcome and support the declared purpose of the Malmö Forum “to jointly take concrete steps forward in the work on Holocaust remembrance and the fight against antisemitism”. Antisemitism and all other forms of racism and bigotry pose a growing threat that must be fought most forcefully. We commend governments’ resolve and efforts in this regard.

At the same time, we issue a stark warning against the political instrumentalization of the fight against antisemitism. In the interest of the integrity, credibility and effectiveness of that fight, we urge the leaders at the Malmö Forum to reject and counter this instrumentalization.

A particular concern in this context is the “[working definition of antisemitism](#)” that the IHRA adopted in May 2016, in the aftermath of the [2015 Global Forum](#) for Combating Antisemitism organized by the Israeli government.

Eleven “contemporary examples of antisemitism” have been attached to this IHRA definition, seven of which relate to Israel. Several of these examples are being weaponized against human rights organizations and solidarity activists who denounce Israel’s occupation and human rights violations. They legitimize wrongful accusations of antisemitism, which serve as a warning for anyone voicing criticism of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. This has a chilling effect on free speech and academic freedom and compromises the fight against antisemitism.

Regrettably, this clear abuse of the IHRA definition and of the examples has so far not been acknowledged by governments and parliaments that have adopted it. More concerning, the European Union is working hard to implement the IHRA definition across multiple policy areas and to entrench it society-wide. In January 2021, the European Commission published a “[Handbook](#)” for that purpose, which was [harshly criticized](#) by civil society stakeholders. Among other initiatives, the handbook promotes giving legal effect to the IHRA definition and cultivates it as a criterion to allocate or deny funding to civil society organizations. We fear this is a prelude to discriminatory and repressive policies.

On 5 October 2021, the European Commission presented the EU’s long-awaited “[Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life](#)”. Like the aforementioned handbook, this strategy ignores the growing concerns about the shortcomings and instrumentalization of the IHRA definition, as also raised by various stakeholders in the context of a [public consultation](#)

launched by the Commission; including this academic [expert submission](#) with annex illustrating the instrumentalization of the IHRA definition and a [joint letter](#) by ten European NGOs and networks. In fact, the EU's new strategy feeds these concerns.

With concern, we also note that the political instrumentalization of the fight against antisemitism and of the IHRA definition is being facilitated by coordinators and commissioners appointed by the European Commission and national governments. In particular in [Germany](#), this has created a toxic and intimidating atmosphere. We notice coordination with and reliance on lobby organizations shielding the Israeli government.

This political approach and entanglement has a divisive and polarizing effect, which undermines broad support for the fight against antisemitism and distracts attention from acute sources of antisemitism. It also contradicts the universalist spirit of the Stockholm Declaration, which is missing from the IHRA definition.

By contrast, an alternative definition of antisemitism launched earlier this year does carry this spirit: the [Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism](#) (JDA). The JDA was crafted by a group of scholars from the United States, Israel, Europe and the UK, who have vast experience with the IHRA definition. After more than one year of deliberations, the JDA was launched in March 2021. It has been [endorsed](#) by more than 300 scholars of antisemitism and related fields, including many heads of institutes in Europe and the US.

We encourage the leaders at the Malmö Forum to add the JDA to their policy toolbox and to rely on it for guidance. Rooted in universal principles, the JDA is clearer and more coherent than the IHRA definition. Without any underlying political agenda, it offers guidance concerning political speech where the IHRA definition has created muddle and controversy.

We recommend the JDA also in view of Prime Minister Löfven's [statement](#), issued in anticipation of the Malmö Forum: "We must address Holocaust denial and antisemitism by protecting and promoting democratic values and respect for human rights". The JDA reflects and respects democratic values and human rights.

For the sake of a concrete outcome of the Malmö Forum, the Swedish government has invited all participating delegations to present "pledges". We call on the leaders at the Malmö Forum to jointly pledge to reject and counter the escalating political instrumentalization of the fight against antisemitism, which undermines democratic values and human rights and is causing grave harm to this fight.

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