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Student Intifada as Counterinsurgency Target: How IHRA Definition operates as a Security Doctrine

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ABSTRACT

The fact that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism was adopted has created much debate in the academic and activist spheres. Although it is presented as a means of fighting anti-Semitism, critics say the definition has been abused to silence opposition, especially the pro-Palestinian scholarship and activism. In this paper, the IHRA definition is analyzed in terms of academic freedom and counterinsurgency and its deployment is contextualized in terms of larger silencing student protest and human-rights advocacy strategies on Palestine. Based on the recent scholarship, we maintain that the usage of the IHRA definition is a kind of epistemic government which diminishes the conditions of possibility of academic freedom, especially where the concept of Palestine solidarity is being presented as illegitimate. Through foregrounding the convergence of discourse of human-rights, student activism and institutional power, this study proposes how the definition of IHRA serves as a counterinsurgency strategy to sanction academic and political dissent.

Keywords: IHRA Definition of Anti-Semitism, Anti-Insurgency, Academic Freedom, Epistemic Government, Student Activism, Solidarity.

Putting the Debate into perspective: The IHRA Definition and the University

Over the past few years, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism has been among the most disputed tools of international discussions on the issue of racism, academic freedom, and political dissent. The IHRA definition was first approved in 2016 and it was an offering of a practical tool to detect and track anti-Semitism within institutions. However it has been neutral in its operationalization. Critics have claimed that the definition fails to draw the difference between anti-Semitism and political criticism against a state by factoring in illustrative examples that make a connection between certain criticisms of Israel and anti-Semitism (Spektorowski, 2024; Bangstad, 2025). This conflation has been more and more used in academic institutions and in everyday speech as a disciplinary mechanism, the speech that pro-Palestinian has become a suspect speech. Here, when it comes to university campuses, which are traditionally perceived as areas of critical inquiry, democratic engagement, and power challenge, their turn

into securitized areas on which dissent is managed by language of counter-extremism and counterinsurgency (Tatour, 2024; Abdel-Fattah, 2025).

It is at the point of knowledge governance, securitization and political activism that the problem that this paper aims to solve arises. Institutional regulation of the IHRA framework has made the global student movements in solidarity with Palestine to be the major targets of the institutional control. Presumably a widespread tendency: Palestine solidarity is not only discussed but also pursued (Sen, 2024; Tatour, 2024) with disciplinary measures against student societies in the United Kingdom, the cancellation of events in Germany, and increased surveillance in Australia and the United States being just some examples. Such policing is justified in most instances by the IHRA definition which makes political claims by Palestinians threatening to campus safety or community cohesion. This is an alarming trend: instead of acting as an insurance policy against anti-Semitism, the IHRA definition has been instrumentalised to act as a security dogma that punishes dissenting knowledge and dissenting activism.

To get a clue about this development, it is important to pay consideration to the bigger theoretical contexts of securitization and counterinsurgency. The Copenhagen School came up with the theory of securitization, which argues that political actors make issues look like existential threats necessitating extraordinary action (Buzan, Waeber, and deWilde, 1998). When operationalized in the field of academia, the IHRA definition is an illustration of this process, i.e. it turns the student activism into the matter of security, thus sanctioning exceptional limitations on speech and association (Bangstad, 2025; Spektorowski, 2024). At the same time, counterinsurgency theory sheds some light on the way dissent is not only crushed but also delegitimized and punished through non-military means. In its embrace of IHRA, universities are seen to act as outposts of logics of counterinsurgency, which find Palestine solidarity to be a kind of epistemic insurgency that needs to be encircled. According to (Palestine Legal, & Center for Constitutional Rights, 2015), these practices can be considered knowledge policing, as there is a strict regulation of what is legitimate to be said, and what is not, in a manner that would serve the best interests of the official geopolitics.

The implications of the freedom of academics are severe. There has developed a body of scholarship of what today is called the "Palestine Exception" to the free speech and academic freedom (Bangstad, 2025; Tatour, 2024). (ELSC & BRISMES, 2023) explains in the United Kingdom how IHRA adoption of universities has enabled the suppression of student unions and faculty that criticize Israel policies. In her study in Australia, (Tatour, 2024) demonstrates how this model has likewise been applied to silencing the views of Palestinians in the name of ensuring the safety of the community. (Abdel-Fattah, 2025) also adds to this discussion by placing such practices in the context of radicalized securitization, in which Muslim and Palestinian activism is always refracted in terms of radical, extremist, or destabilizing positions. Collectively, these works demonstrate how the IHRA definition serves to diminish academic freedom and refresh the hierarchies of geopolitics at the expense of academic freedom.

In this paper, the critique of the IHRA definition is thus made in response to a definition of the concept not merely as a tool of law or rhetoric, but in fact as an operational doctrine of security disciplining student activism. The research question that will be used to focus this inquiry is as follows: How does the adoption and operationalization of the IHRA definition of

anti-Semitism operate as a security doctrine, which directs student activism, in the case of the Student Intifada, in academic institutions? To respond to this, the paper examines a number of dimensions that are interrelated: securitization of pro-Palestinian speech, counterinsurgency politics of university governance, the colonialist of academic freedom and the sort of resistance that students and academics have engaged in opposing IHRA adoption. Through the exploration of these dimensions, the study will not only shed light on the process of dissent being disciplined, but also the fight over academic freedom being a mirror of the broader processes of the colonial power and the de-colonial opposition.

This study therefore has threefold objectives. First, it aims at examining how the definition of the IHRA has been used to securitize student activism and de-legitimize Palestinian solidarity within higher education. Second, it attempts to contextualize these practices in terms of wider theoretical conceptualizations of securitization, counterinsurgency and colonialist of knowledge, in doing so pointing out how the unequal distribution of academic freedom is racially and geopolitically structured. Third, this research study aims to add to the existing academic discourse on academic freedom and anti-Semitism in that it anticipates other conceptual frameworks and student resistance modes that challenge the hegemonic power of the IHRA. By so doing, the study frames the Student Intifada neither as a struggle over politics, nor even as a struggle over epistemic justice, according to which the fact of producing and sharing knowledge about Palestine is itself a form of resistance (Fúnez-Flores, 2024; Tshishonga, 2025).

Finally, the investigation argues that the IHRA definition goes beyond the category of a disputed policy instrument; it represents the intersection of counterinsurgency and securitization in the field of academic governance. The name explains why universities end up entangled in politics of global security in which critical voices are effectively relegated by use of seemingly impartial administrative policies. However, this is a one way process. Opposition persists, either through boycotting the IHRA in favor of other frameworks like the Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism (Gould, 2018) or the organizing of students and faculty that say that the critique of Israel is right and even required. The competition over the IHRA in the academic spaces, is thus a reflection of a bigger geopolitical fight over the limits of legitimate knowledge and one that concerns the future of academic freedom.

Security through speech: Theoretical Orientations

It is the aim of this paper to place the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism into the wider analytical context of the securitization and counterinsurgency theory. Securitization is theorized, based on the Copenhagen School of securitization studies (Buzan et al., 1998), as the process whereby political entities rebrand normal political concerns into existential threats, which require emergency action. In its application to the organizational context of academic institutions, the IHRA definition acts as a securitizing maneuver: institutionalization of the criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic legitimizes exceptional limitations on speech, the production of knowledge and activism (Abdel-Fattah, 2025; Spektorowski, 2024).

Simultaneously, the counterinsurgency (COIN) theory also provides an insight in the light of which dissent is disciplined. Counterinsurgency scholars believe that COIN is not only military repression, but also includes cultural, ideological, and epistemic maneuvers aimed at delegitimizing resistance and maintaining hegemony (Rosenau, 2009). In the university

context, the support of Palestine is not only posed as an insurgency, a threat to both epistemic sense and the political power, but also against which disciplinary and administrative actions are enlisted (Tatour, 2024; Bangstad, 2025).

This analysis is supplemented by decolonial theory. (Fúnez-Flores, 2024) predicts the so-called coloniality of academic freedom, in which Western universities reinforce hierarchies which cancel epistemologies of the Global South. The Student Intifada being targeted in this way therefore demonstrates how securitization overlaps with colonial knowledge regimes. As a result, the theoretical framework of this paper incorporates securitization theory, counterinsurgency literature, and decolonial epistemology to suggest that the IHRA definition is a counterinsurgency doctrinal mechanism of countering student dissent.

Research Design and Approach Institutional Practices Trace

The methodology of this article is qualitative based on the critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) and documentary analysis. The corpus of empirical materials contains:

1. Policy Documents: University policies, adoption policy of the IHRA definition and other state policies.

2. Student Movements: Public Records Student movements Publishers Student unions Publications by student activist groups Open letters by student unions School disciplinary cases involving pro-Palestinian activism.

3. Academic and Journalistic Analysis: Literature reviews on IHRA, academic freedom, and securitization and critical essays.

Critical discourse analysis questions the way the language creates anti-Semitism, opposition, and security. In line with (van Dijk, 2017), the analysis will be aimed at identification of strategies of framing, which render illegitimate a specific set of criticism.

In addition, the research uses a comparative case study, analyzing the example of the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and Australia where IHRA implementation has had a direct influence on student activism. This aspect of comparison indicates how the doctrine of IHRA has spread across the globe as a security doctrine with transnational consequences (Sen, 2024; Al-Taher &Younes, 2024).

By triangulating documents, policies and scholarly discussions, this methodology aims at not only describing the counterinsurgency role of IHRA, but also critically questioning it.

Anti-Semitism to Security Doctrine: Critical Interventions into the Literature

1. IHRA and Politics of definition

The 2016 IHRA definition of anti-Semitism was firstly advocated as a guideline to use in data collection and raising awareness (Nelson, 2022). However, critics note that the examples it provides to illustrate the idea of anti-Semitism lumps racism with criticism of Israel (Bangstad, 2025; Spektorowski, 2024) argues that this ambiguity of definition enables instrumentalisation of politics, thus making anti-Semitism a category of securitization that disciplines Palestine debate.

2. Freedom of Academic Expression

The implications of the IHRA definition adoption on academic freedom have been widespread. (Tatour, 2024) reports on censorship or delegitimation of the Palestinian voices in Australian universities on the basis of anti-Semitism, which is reflected in the context of the UK (ELSC & BRISMES, 2023). (Bangstad, 2025) describes this phenomenon as the So-called

Palestine Exception to Academic Freedom in which speech that criticizes Israeli policies is singled out as having restrictions prohibited in comparison to other types of political speech.

3. Securitization and Counterinsurgency

The IHRA definition is an example of securitization because it conceptualizes student dissent as a danger to institutional stability. (Abdel-Fattah, 2025) emphasizes the re-positioning of Muslim and pro-Palestinian solidarity movements through the discourses of security which reduce the efforts of activism to radicalization. In counterinsurgency terms, (Palestine Legal, & Center for Constitutional Rights, 2015) claim that universities exercise knowledge policing, which means that Palestinian narratives are kept on the periphery. This is in line with the focus of COIN to control the hearts and minds by influencing acceptable discourses.

4. Student Activism as a place of struggle

The student activism has always been a crucial element in the liberation movement in the world (Gill & DeFronzo, 2009). Student organizations have been mobilizing in the Palestinian context despite the increasing repression (Meinzer, 2024). It has been reported that the disciplinary measures, restrictions of the events and surveillance are disproportionately imposed on the Palestine student societies and allies (Runnymede Trust, 2024). According to (Sen, 2024), it is a phenomenon in a world-wide trend of securitizing student activism, in which universities are adopting state security ideologies into campus governance.

5. Coloniality, Epistemic Violence

The colonial aspect of IHRA adoption has been highlighted. (Fúnez- Flores, 2024) asserts that the freedom of academia is hierarchical and favors Eurocentric epistemology disfavoring decolonial views. This is similar to the observation made by (Abdel-Fattah, 2025) that Palestinian solidarity is being defined as insurgent following the colonial constructs where resistance was criminalized. The IHRA structure re-creates colonial hierarchies in the academy as it limits the voices of Palestinians.

6. Substitute Structures and Opposition

The IHRA definition has not been taken blindly in all academic institutions. Scholars have also developed alternative statements, including the (Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism, 2021), according to which anti-Semitism is differentiated not only from acceptable criticism of Israel but is also characterized through that (Gould, 2018). Academic unions and student organizations have organized against the IHRA definition, making it appear to be inconsistent with the ideals of free inquiry (El-Haj et al., 2025). The existence of these resistance efforts reflects that even though it is a widely used securitization tool, the definition of the IHRA is still disputed in the academic sphere.

The literature is brought together on some salient observations:

1. The definition of the IHRA is a contentious political tool, which serves as a doctrinal process of securitization rather than a description tool.
2. Its use erodes academic freedom by confusing the criticism of Israel and racial bias, thus leading to disciplinary measures on students and academicians.
3. Universities which support the IHRA definition effectively are actively involved in counterinsurgency policies which punish dissent and conform to state security reasoning.
4. This relationship recreates colonial epistemic formations, that is, it represents the Palestinian voices as suspicious and rebellious as such.

5. The opposition continues within other systems and mobilization of students but still the institutional pressures are more prominent.

As a result, theoretical and empirical publications support the main thesis of this paper, namely that the IHRA definition is a counterinsurgency doctrine applied to the Student Intifada and the general movements of Palestinian solidarity.

Campus as Battlefield: Results of Comparative Contexts

An analysis of policy documents, case studies and discussion in multiple contexts of higher-education indicates patterns of consistency in the deployment of the IHRA definition as a security doctrine against the activism of students. In this chapter three findings have been made that are related to each other and they are; the securitization of speech, institutional counterinsurgent practices and epistemic coloniality.

3.1 Student Activism that is securitized

Universities which use the IHRA definition always repackage pro-Palestinian activism as a danger to community unity and security. The fact that Palestine solidarity events could cause harm to Jewish students has served as the basis to issue disciplinary proceedings against the student unions of the United Kingdom, often without any demonstrable evidence (ELSC & BRISMES, 2023). In Germany, the cancellation of academic discussions on Palestine has been on security grounds, regardless of how they have been presented by the faculty as scholastic discussions (Al-Taher & Younes, 2024). This tendency is in line with the conceptualization of securitization presented by (Buzan et al., 1998): redefinition of ordinary political articulation into an existential danger to necessitate exceptional governance. Here, IHRA definition is a securitizing speech act which allows administrators to justify extraordinary interventions in the sphere of academic freedom.

3.2 Counterinsurgency Administration of Universities

The Palestinian solidarity is being targeted which is reminiscent of the traditional counterinsurgency. The counterinsurgency theory does not just focus on the use of physical strength but also ideological warfare- influence of narratives and the delegitimisation of the opposition (Rosenau, 2009). Counterinsurgency in universities takes three main forms (1) pre-emptive limitations on student activities; (2) post-hoc disciplinary action on protesters; and (3) institutional integration with external security forces. (Abdel-Fattah, 2025) shows how the solidarity of Muslim students is re-constructed as an element of radicalization that is a framing that is directly associated with the counter-terrorist policies. These actions recreate an atmosphere where dissent is not only suppressed, but it is defined as illegitimate by nature, thus putting an end to activism before it has a chance to take hold.

3.3 Colonialism of knowledge and policing of knowledge

The IHRA definition is also working under a larger colonial matrix of power. (Fúnez-Flores, 2024) contends that academic freedom is the exercise of coloniality favoring the Eurocentric epistemologies at the expense of the rest. Such dynamic is reflected in the disciplining of the Palestinian views: simply stating the Palestinian historical or political statements is interpreted as a suspect. This, according to (Palestine Legal, & Center for Constitutional Rights, 2015), is knowledge policing, in which epistemic insurgencies, i.e., knowledge that disputes colonial hierarchies, are intentionally removed. The results indicate that it is impossible to decouple the adoption of IHRA in universities and the colonial past that informs the process of governing the production of knowledge.

The University as Counterinsurgency Apparatus: What it means to Academic Freedom

The results are relevant to the wider discussions on the politics of definition, securitization, and academic freedom in three ways.

4.1 IHRA as a Security Doctrine

The IHRA definition is not just a simple descriptive instrument, it is also a doctrine of security that operationalizes the securitization of dissent. The fact that its dubious examples are not that clear in drawing the line between anti-Semitism and political criticism makes it a versatile tool in the hands of administrators who wish to punish activism. This allows it to be a doctrinally powerful framework based on its flexibility: it offers an ostensibly neutral framework and allows selective enforcement (Bangstad, 2025; Spektorowski, 2024). This doctrine is internalized and this makes the universities fit into the larger state counterinsurgency policies.

4.2 University as Counterinsurgency

The university turns out to be not just a place of knowledge production but also a place of struggle over epistemic authority. Counterinsurgency theory is a theory stating that narrative control is as critical as physical control. With the IHRA definition in place, universities become agents of a broader system of soft counterinsurgency, which legitimizes Palestinian stories even as they position themselves as an impartial guarantor of security. This is indicative of the larger, so-called, Palestine Exception to Academic Freedom (Tatour, 2024; Palestine Legal, & Center for Constitutional Rights, 2015), where Palestinian solidarity becomes the sole movement in the world that is specifically attacked.

4.3 Coloniality of Academic Freedom

The current discussion supports the coloniality of academic freedom. In tertiary education, institutional structures are often biased to favor Euro-American forms of epistemology, thus silencing decolonial voices. Such a widespread censorship of Palestinian discourse by universities is a way of making colonial knowledge regimes structurally obstruct epistemic authority of Palestinians (Fúnez-, 2024). This conclusion is in line with findings by (Abdel-Fattah, 2025) who states that manifestations of Palestinian solidarity are re-defined as insurgent and hence is a symptom of colonialism of criminalizing opposition. As a result, the IHRA framework is not limited to the discourse of anti-Semitism; it is a part of colonial power persistence by governing knowledge.

4.4 Resistance and Alternatives

Regardless of the entrenchment of IHRA guidelines, there are still forms of resistance. A more academic substitute is the Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism (Gould, 2018) which openly discriminates against anti-Semitism ideology and legitimate criticism of the Israeli policy. Institutional repression does not stop student movements that continue to mobilize themselves and recontextualize their activism as campaigns of epistemic justice (El -Haj et al., 2025). This sort of resistive practice demonstrates that IHRA is not a monolithic, uncontested doctrine, but rather an arena of contested practice where competing conceptions of academic freedom and justice interact with one another.

Arguments against Epistemic Governance: Conclusion/Reflections

The above discussion assumes that the IHRA version of anti-Semitism functions as a security doctrine in institutionalized academic institutions which is effectively a mechanism of counterinsurgency which aims at student activism, especially the Student Intifada. By

securitizing, counterinsurgent sing and epistemic ally colonizing, the IHRA construct transforms pro-Palestinian activism, which would otherwise be considered as a valid manifestation of political agency, into the threat of security that creates the need to discipline it. The implication of academic freedom is then also enormous: the subversion of the principle of free inquiry by the subsumption of criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism makes universities subordinate to the principles of state security and in turn to their own assimilation with the larger security needs of the state.

Meanwhile, the opposition to the adoption of IHRA highlights the disputed nature of this doctrine. Several other structures like the Jerusalem Declaration and continued mobilization activities by students and faculty members demonstrate that academic milieus continue to be a site of struggle. This course of the academic freedom will then depend on the institutional policy choices and the capacity of student movements to express and deliver epistemic justice in the face of widespread securitization.

Constriction and Future Research

The current research is limited to three major constraints. First, the research question is primarily designed around the qualitative analysis of documents, and there is a lack of ethnographic information that is directly based on the involvement of student participants; future research ought to, hence, incorporate interviews and participatory research to preempt the lived experiences of student activists. Second, despite questioning the cases in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and Australia, comparative research that queries the implementation of IHRA in non-Western academic environments is still required. Third, there is a need to promote interdisciplinary research to connect the discourse on IHRA to broader trends in anti-terrorism politics, Islam phobia, and surveillance of students using social media in higher educational institutions.

The long-term impacts of IHRA adoption on academic hiring procedures, research funds distributions, and knowledge generation could also be explored in future research. In addition, another key line of research includes the investigation of the mechanisms of resistance: in particular, how students, the faculty, and unions have successfully defied IHRA, and how such struggles may be used to deepen and inform decolonial movements across higher education.

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