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## The IHRA definition of antisemitism in a melee. A critical discussion of the mobilizations against the first international definition of antisemitism

**Kurzzassung:** Der Beitrag diskutiert Peter Ullrichs „Gutachten zur ‚Arbeitsdefinition Antisemitismus‘“ kritisch und ordnet dessen Ablehnung der IHRA-Definition in den gegenwärtigen Konflikt um eine tragfähige Antisemitismusdefinition ein. Gegenstand der Kritik ist, dass Ullrich die immerhin erste internationale Antisemitismusdefinition unzureichend würdigt, einen unbestimmten Begriff des israelbezogenen Antisemitismus hat und schließlich seine eigene Positioniertheit in wiederkehrenden Kontroversen um gegenwärtigen Antisemitismus unzureichend transparent macht. Sein Gutachten ist entsprechend sowohl als wissenschaftliche wie als politische Intervention zu deuten.

**Abstract:** The paper examines Peter Ullrich's expert opinion on the IHRA definition. It reviews his rejection of the definition in the conflict over a viable and complex definition of antisemitism. Ullrich does not sufficiently appreciate the first international definition of antisemitism and has an undefined concept of Israel-related antisemitism. Moreover, he does not make his own positioning in the recurring controversies surrounding contemporary antisemitism adequately transparent. His expertise should be interpreted as both a scientific and a political intervention.

Since its inception, the IHRA<sup>1</sup> definition of antisemitism has been publicly criticized and contested by various actors for different reasons. Globally speaking, in particular British, US-American and Canadian academic and civil society organizations (with Jewish and non-Jewish members) mobilize campaigns and appeals against the IHRA definition. The critical "Expert Opinion on the 'Working Definition of Antisemitism' of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance" authored by the sociologist and antisemitism researcher Peter Ullrich in 2019 has drawn public attention particularly in the German context. It combines the most common points of criticism of the IHRA definition. The expert opinion was commissioned and published by the *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung* and the aid organization *medico international*.

### 1. The historical achievement of the IHRA definition of antisemitism is disregarded

Peter Ullrich formulated his scientific and civil society perspective on the IHRA Working Definition in detail in the expert opinion, further elaborated it in several interviews and defended it against criticism in a short text (cf. Ullrich, 2019d; 2019e; 2019f; 2019g; 2019c). Even though Ullrich sets himself the goal of debating the pros and cons of the IHRA definition, the positive aspects are treated much too cursorily. First he finds fault with the designation "working definition" in the title of the IHRA definition, claiming that it obscures the status of the definition and suggests that it is merely temporary and must necessarily be developed further (cf. Ullrich, 2019a: 8f.). However, Ullrich does not convincingly contextualize a key reason for this choice of words: without this title, the definition might not have been adopted politically and diplomatically by the more than thirty member states of the IHRA (cf. Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, 2017: 23; Wetzel, n.d.: 1f.). This background is important and should have been given due consideration and especially more weight in the critical examination. It is a historical achievement that an international organization declares at least at the symbolic level that it wants to fight antisemitism and protect Jews from it. Several years of international negotiations in various bodies underlie this collective effort (cf. Porat, 2018: 28, 44ff.; Voigt, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> The IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) is an international organization with the aim "to strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust education, research and remembrance". The Working Definition of Antisemitism developed in 2005 was adopted at the IHRA's first semiannual plenary meeting in May 2016. The plenary comprises politicians and experts from the member states. Since 2017, numerous actors have adopted the Working Definition. This includes inter alia parliaments, governments, federal and state ministries, municipalities, city councils, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, educational institutions, universities, civil society organizations and Jewish community security organizations (Bundesverband RIAS, 2021: 7, 20ff.).

The IHRA definition came about in 2005 when many scientists and civil society actors faced the question of how Israel-related antisemitism could be distinguished from non-antisemitic criticism of Israeli domestic and foreign policy. Criteria for making this distinction hardly existed at the time, but there was a great need for such against the background of rising controversies about hostility towards Israel and about the relationship between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. The IHRA definition constitutes an attempt to set down these urgently needed criteria for distinction.<sup>2</sup> This is one of the reasons why the illustrating examples that accompany the definition focus on Israel-related antisemitism.

## 2. A biased reading of the IHRA definition

While Ullrich lists many Jewish and non-Jewish actors who use the IHRA definition of antisemitism, he does not put them in perspective. While Jews have opposing views on the IHRA definition and its applicability, it must be taken into account that Jewish organizations in Germany with broad membership advocate for its use, for instance the *Central Council of Jews in Germany*, which represents 23 regional and state associations and 105 Jewish communities with 93,695 members (cf. Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland, 2017, n.d.; Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland, 2021: 6).<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Ullrich gives a prominent role to the US-American organization *Jewish Voice for Peace* and Israeli scientists who reject the IHRA definition and mobilize against it (cf. Ullrich, 2019a: 6). Even though the debates about definitions of antisemitism are conducted transnationally and the mobilizations against the IHRA definition are global, at least in Germany the circle of those who reject the IHRA definition is rather limited in number. An expert opinion that engages with the German-speaking context should take this into account.

Ullrich had already positioned himself against the IHRA definition before the expert opinion was published.<sup>4</sup> He argues with regard to the formal quality that the core definition is extremely "vaguely" formulated, "inconsistent, contradictory" and "reductionist" (Ullrich, 2019a: 3) because it obscuringly defines antisemitism as a "certain perception", and that antisemitism is wrongly conceptualized as a "sensory experience of Jews" and "*sensory perception*", rather than as an antisemitic caricature of Jews (*ibid.*: 11, emphasis in the original). On the one hand, this line of argument shows that Ullrich imputes a very reduced (positivist) understanding of perception to the definition that ignores social constructivist aspects. However, terms such as "stereotypes", "myth", "allegations" or "claims" that occur in the explanatory notes on the definition point to such aspects. On the other hand, Ullrich hides the important remark that the IHRA Working Definition was translated into German in a footnote (cf. Ullrich, 2019a: 11). The meanings of "perception" in English, "percepción" in Spanish and "perception" in French, to take three languages as examples, are more multifaceted than in German. In addition to sensory perception, these terms can also refer to an apprehension, an image, a notion, an idea or a view. Ullrich does not give any weight to such (sociological) semantic content. That the core definition leaves the concrete form of the antisemitic perception indeterminate is a strength, not a weakness, as antisemitic stereotypes and ascriptions are inexhaustible and constantly changing and adapting to the present.

## 3. The seemingly indefinable Israel-related antisemitism

Ullrich further criticizes the core definition for emphasizing some antisemitic phenomena "while largely omitting other key dimensions", resulting in "systematic gaps" (*ibid.*: 11f.). However, a comprehensive and complex definition of antisemitism is difficult not only due to the 2000-year history of antisemitism but also because of its complexity, multifaceted character and ability to change and adapt (which he himself concedes). That important aspects do not figure prominently enough in the definition or the illustrative examples – Ullrich does find six of eleven examples quite suitable (cf. *ibid.*: 12) – is not a reason to dismiss them as a whole. Rather, extensions and additions to the examples should be sought which for instance also classify antagonism towards cultural-religious Jewish practices as antisemitic, which Ullrich rightly criticizes as a gap.

Consequently, in Ullrich's view four of the illustrative examples that supplement and refine the core definition pose a central problem. They all refer to Israel-related antisemitism. According to him, they are unbalanced, one-sided and conducive to inappropriate and negligent applications of the definition or require too much complex contextual knowledge (cf. *ibid.*: 15). Some IHRA examples can be used to categorize agitations against Israel as antisemitic that are not (yet) antisemitic according to Ullrich's definition of antisemitism. This revisits, in another formulation, his reflections from 2011 on the grey areas of criticism of Israel. Ullrich argues that what many

<sup>2</sup> The popular "3D test of Anti-Semitism" by Natan Sharansky also emerged in this time period and addresses this need (cf. Sharansky, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The *European Jewish Congress*, which by its own account represents roughly 2.5 million members, and the *European Jewish Association* also welcome the IHRA definition of antisemitism (cf. European Jewish Congress, 2021; European Jewish Association, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> For instance in a panel discussion in April 2019 (cf. Linkes Bündnis gegen Antisemitismus München, 2019).

scientists and civil society actors categorize as unambiguously antisemitic on a definitional basis can often not be classified as such without doubt but is more ambivalent, ambiguous, complex or could in many cases also be interpreted differently (cf. Ullrich, 2013a: 84ff.; 2019b; 2021). In particular, he locates the transition from criticism to resentment and a lack of distancing from Israel-related antisemitism in the wide grey area (cf. Ullrich, 2013a: 187). This largely disregards that denial and reinterpretation of antisemitism form an inseparable part of current antisemitism and occur in countless cases in society (cf. Schwarz-Friesel, 2019: 12, 130ff.; Salzborn, 2013: 5).

In any case, Ullrich's concept of Israel-related antisemitism remains very indeterminate in the expert opinion, and the definition he proposed elsewhere also insufficiently theorizes the Israel-related form of expression. Although his considerations often revolve around how (left-wing) actors in Germany and globally relate to and perceive the Israel-Palestine conflict, Ullrich often focuses on what he does *not* regard as *Israel-related antisemitism*. Precisely because Israel-related antisemitism is widespread and influential in society, it should play a key role in a definition of antisemitism. For in society at large, with a view to concrete experiences of discrimination and violence this current manifestation is not over- but underestimated as an everyday threat (cf. FRA, 2018: 26, 43f.; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019: 12, 17).

#### **4. More rejection than critique: mobilizations against the IHRA definition**

At first sight, the expert opinion could be read and understood as a critique of the IHRA definition of antisemitism. However, a thorough reading makes apparent that Ullrich does not merely rigorously criticize the definition but in fact rejects it. In his concluding recommendations, he explicitly advocates *not* to use the IHRA definition due to its "severe deficits" and "structural weaknesses" (Ullrich, 2019a: 3, 17). The expert opinion even contains the warning that those who (continue to) use the IHRA definition do harm to an open and democratic society and take part in restricting freedom of speech and freedom of assembly (cf. ibid.: 3, 6, 16). Here Ullrich paints an exaggerated threat scenario. His often repeated claim to objectivize, to de-emotionalize and to overcome the factionalism in the research on antisemitism (Ullrich, 2013a: 14; 2019c) is not fulfilled in this manner.

March 2021 saw the publication of the *Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism* (JDA), which explicitly views itself as an alternative to the IHRA definition. Ullrich is one of the 200 original signatories (cf. JDA, 2021; Ullrich, 2021). The controversies about the IHRA definition and now also about the JDA are at their core political and hardly scientific: they are about how Israeli policies are to be assessed, where Israel-related antisemitism begins and how legitimate *BDS* is (*Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions*).<sup>5</sup> While the transnational boycott campaign and movement are only mentioned in two footnotes in the expert opinion, they take up more space in the interviews about the publication, where Ullrich criticizes that *BDS* is not antisemitic as a whole and is being focused on too much in the current debates about antisemitic actors and practices (cf. Ullrich, 2019f; 2019e).<sup>6</sup> His objection that the IHRA definition is being instrumentalized is also to be viewed in this context. However, every definition can be instrumentalized.

#### **5. The melee about a complex definition of antisemitism**

In the expert opinion, instead of making transparent that he is himself an actor and thus an active component of the recurring controversies about current expressions of Israel-related antisemitism, Ullrich makes himself out to be an objective, impersonal and neutral observer. But he is not. Ullrich has been and is being criticized for publications, sometimes severely, by various actors (including scientists and civil society actors) and has written several replies (cf. Ullrich, 2013b; 2013c; 2015; Kohlstruck/Ullrich/Bergmann/Schüler-Springorum, 2015; Ullrich/Kohlstruck, 2017; Ullrich, 2019c). A central question was to what extent smaller or larger parts of the party The Left take antisemitic positions and act accordingly or to what extent actors in Berlin critical of antisemitism use inflated concepts of antisemitism in their work (cf. Ullrich/Werner, 2011: 424ff.; Kohlstruck/Ullrich, 2015: 56). Ullrich is a scientist and *at the same time* an involved actor with certain interests, so that his expert opinion constitutes both an academic and a political intervention. This is *not a problem* but should be made transparent. This self-positioning is missing, at least within the expert opinion, which makes it difficult for readers to contextualize it. In a reply published later, it is at least briefly discernible that Ullrich is aware of this when he writes that "political positionings" determine the views in the debates (cf. Ullrich, 2019c).

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<sup>5</sup> The transnational campaign and movement are explicitly directed against the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

<sup>6</sup> Perceptions of numerous Jews do not play a role here. In a study of the *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* from 2018, 82 per cent of the 16,395 Jews surveyed in twelve European states responded that they consider it antisemitic when Israel or Israelis are boycotted (cf. FRA, 2018: 29).

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