

Remarks for Senate Majority Policy Committee Hearing

Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Jason Holtzman, and I serve as Chief of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, where I also lead our Center to Combat Antisemitism.

When antisemitism occurs in Greater Philadelphia, our team is often involved in what happens next. We hear from parents and students. We work with synagogues and Jewish institutions. And we work with law enforcement, elected officials, school districts and universities as they respond to incidents.

From that vantage point, one of the most significant challenges we face is not simply the prevalence of antisemitism. It is the inconsistency in how antisemitism is understood.

Some incidents leave little room for disagreement.

Over the past year, we worked with a family in the Lower Merion School District after a student displayed a swastika to a Jewish classmate and made violent threats. A synagogue received a voicemail claiming that three pressure-cooker bombs had been placed inside the building. Another threatening message came from an email address named "DeathToAllJews" and praised Robert Bowers, the perpetrator of the Tree of Life synagogue attack.

We know what those incidents are.

The more difficult situations often involve Israel and Zionism, particularly in schools, on college campuses and in political spaces.

Let me be clear: criticism of Israel is not inherently antisemitic. Criticizing Israel's government is not inherently antisemitic. Advocating for Palestinian rights is not inherently antisemitic. Jewish Americans themselves hold a wide range of views about Israel and Israeli politics.

But that cannot mean that anything said or done under the banner of opposition to Israel or Israel's government is automatically insulated from scrutiny for antisemitism.

We experienced this firsthand in Philadelphia.

At a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Rittenhouse Square, speakers used violent antisemitic rhetoric, including a call to "precisely target the Zionist enemy."

We reached out to elected officials. A number condemned the rhetoric unequivocally.

Others refused to do so and instead began questioning us about alleged actions of the Israeli government and events taking place in Israel and Gaza—events over which the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia and Jewish Pennsylvanians have no control.

That response illustrates the problem.

American Jews should not have to answer for alleged decisions made by the Israeli government in order for antisemitism directed at Jews here in Pennsylvania to be taken seriously. Condemning antisemitism in Philadelphia should not be contingent upon one's position on a conflict thousands of miles away.

This is why context matters.

Institutions need to be able to ask: Who was targeted? What language was used? Were Jews being held collectively responsible for alleged actions of the Israeli government? Were longstanding antisemitic tropes being invoked? Was violence against Jews or Israelis being celebrated or threatened?

We also have to consider impact as well as intent. Someone may say they did not intend to be antisemitic. That can be relevant. But intent cannot be the only consideration. History, context and the impact on those being targeted matter as well.

This is why our Federation supports the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism.

IHRA explicitly states that criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic. But it also gives institutions examples and a framework for recognizing when rhetoric or conduct may cross that line.

This has been a major priority for our Center to Combat Antisemitism. Most recently, we have been in active dialogue with Attorney General Dave Sunday and his office about IHRA for nearly a year, and we are pleased that the Attorney General has now publicly embraced the definition as an important framework for understanding antisemitism.

A definition, however, is only a tool.

The ultimate goal is consistent and appropriate responses—whether that means education, accountability, security, policy changes or law-enforcement involvement.

We do not need Pennsylvanians to agree about Israel. We do not need them to agree about Zionism. And government should not determine which political viewpoints about the Middle East are acceptable.

But we do need enough common understanding that when antisemitism occurs, our institutions can recognize it and respond appropriately.

Jewish Pennsylvanians should be able to attend school, go to college, walk home from synagogue, participate in public life and express their Jewish identities without fear of harassment, discrimination or violence.

We can protect vigorous political debate while also recognizing contemporary antisemitism.

Those principles are not mutually exclusive. Getting that distinction right is exactly why a clear and consistent understanding of antisemitism matters.

Thank you.