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Dear Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Provost, and members of the University of Melbourne Council

Palestine, Israel and University of Melbourne

We write following the news coverage of a recent motion passed by the University of Melbourne Student Council, which news reports indicate the University has condemned.

The Australia Palestine Advocacy Network is the national peak body for the advocacy of Palestinian human rights. We seek the upholding of international law, and the negotiation of a just peace in the lands of Israel and Palestine in line with UN resolutions and international law.

Universities have long been places where important international issues are discussed, and historical injustices challenged. We trust that the Council is supportive of this tradition, and the importance of student movements calling for change where change is needed. In this context, it is vital that robust discussions about key human rights issues of our time are given the space that they require.

It is universally acknowledged that Palestinians have suffered deep and ongoing injustices. These must be rectified. Countless resolutions at the United Nations General Assembly, as well as the Security Council, have called on Israel to withdraw from its military occupation and cease expanding its settlements into the West Bank. Israel has refused.

Given that the 'peace process' that began nearly 30 years ago, has been stalled for at least a decade, Palestinians have looked for alternative avenues to have their human rights respected. Inspired by how boycotts have been used in other historical nonviolent movements for justice, in 2005 Palestinian civil society groups called for Boycotts, Divestments and Sanctions until Israel complies with international law.

In the debate of recent weeks within Melbourne University, the safety of Jewish students has been noted, by both the Union and the University spokesperson. This of course is a concern that we share. All students must feel safe in their learning environments. We also hold the same concern for members of the student body who are Palestinian and of other Middle Eastern backgrounds, for whom this debate is deeply personal.

Palestinians who speak up against the injustices they face, often have their words or their motives maligned. Their rights to respectful free speech and a sense of safety must also be equally fiercely protected.

It is self-evident that we must not conflate a minority community with a political movement or Government. However, this is often done in the case of Israel, where Israel purports to speak for Jewish people, even though there is of course a deep diversity of views within Jewish Communities. In fact, in a recent Monash University survey, almost a third of the Jewish community in Victoria did not identify as being Zionist.

We would also counsel the University against adopting the IHRA definition of Antisemitism.

The policies of any Government must be open to critique. The IHRA definition of antisemitism muddies the waters between racism and criticism of the State of Israel. This issue arises from the examples that accompany the definition, as the majority refer to Israel. There is more about these concerns in our [factsheet](#).

Human rights lawyers and eminent jurists alike, including [Geoffrey Robertson AO QC](#) are deeply concerned that the definition lacks clarity and stifles discussion about Palestinian human rights. Many Jewish groups and individuals have added their concern, examples of which are chronicled in [this ABC article](#).

In the United Kingdom, after the definition was adopted by universities, an event raising money for Palestinian children and events supporting Palestinian human rights on campus were cancelled. [Academics at the University College London](#) voted not to use the IHRA definition and called on the University to retract its support of it. In the USA, an Executive Order issued by President Trump has led to universities facing lengthy and expensive court proceedings about student activities supporting Palestinian human rights.

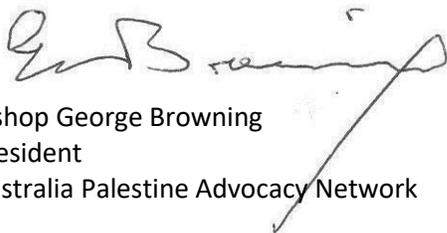
The lead author of the definition, Kenneth Stern, has proactively challenged the way that the IHRA definition is being adopted by countries and other bodies. He published an article: [I drafted the definition of antisemitism. Rightwing Jews are weaponizing it.](#)

Racism, including antisemitism, is a problem. That's why we have the vital Racial Discrimination Act. The IHRA definition of antisemitism makes the job of eliminating racism more difficult, and it separates Jewish people from other minority groups that are discriminated against.

We would call on the University Council to:

1. Ensure their public statements consider the wellbeing and safety of the entirety of the student body, including those from Palestinian backgrounds;
2. That the IHRA definition of antisemitism is rejected as divisive and unhelpful.
3. Agree to an urgent meeting with APAN Executives to discuss the contents of this letter

Yours sincerely



Bishop George Browning
President
Australia Palestine Advocacy Network