

OPINION

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How the JDA can and cannot advance Palestinian rights

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The Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism does not address Israeli-Palestinian politics, but may help open debate

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Demonstrators take part in protests outside a meeting of the Labour Party during the party's discussion of the definition of anti-Semitism [File: Reuters/Henry Nicholls] (Reuters)

On April 21, before the latest escalation in violence in Israel-Palestine, Professor Mark Muhannad Ayyash offered a creative reading of the Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism (JDA) on this website. He cherry-picked several phrases of this document to infuse it with opprobrium, hidden marginalisation, or assumed irrationality of Palestinians or pro-

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Cookie preferences helped draft the JDA affirms that our explicit intent belies any effort to subtly lace our work with orientalist assumptions or demean Palestinian or other political perspectives.

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At the same time, among the JDA's diverse proponents, even those who decry the challenging conditions and gross power inequities that Palestinians face, recognise that our document can't do much to help. This is because the JDA is meant to be useful specifically to foster clarity around the meaning of anti-Semitism in order to help combat ongoing challenges of that particular form of bigotry. When read as designed in its interconnected entirety, the JDA seeks in part to deter the weaponisation of the important struggle against anti-Jewish prejudice against open and robust speech related to Palestine-Israel.

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Indeed, the intended audience of the JDA is Jewish and non-Jewish leaders, and others, concerned specifically about anti-Semitism. In creating the JDA, drafters were aware of the political fallout from the vagueness and limitations in the

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In providing a clear definition of anti-Semitism, and giving examples of a wide range of expressions related to Israeli politics and Zionism that are unlikely to fall into this definition, the JDA refocuses the global struggle against anti-Semitism where it belongs, as one of many insidious expressions of global prejudice against historically-oppressed groups. Like members of many groups, including Palestinians, who have found themselves victimised on the basis of their group status, Jews, who formed the bulk of JDA drafters, are within their rights in seeking to identify what might be particular in anti-Jewish prejudice, while also finding common cause with victims of other patterns of mass prejudice or attempted genocide. In short, the JDA's terrain is that of a group subject to ongoing patterns of prejudice and violence attempting to refine efforts to counter these patterns, in part by addressing slippage between anti-Semitism and other types of speech that some Jews or Israelis might not appreciate, but do not on their face fit into historical understandings of anti-Jewish prejudice.

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Yet, the JDA has been critiqued both as devoting too much space to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, in its numerous examples, and not enough space to it, in avoiding a clear statement against Zionism or the anti-Palestinian politics of the current Israeli state. Each of these critiques misses the basic point. That is, the recent politicisation of the IHRA definition because of the specific ways it has been read to elide pro-Palestinian speech and anti-Semitism requires further clarification to disentangle Palestinian-Israeli politics from the basic purpose for a definition of anti-Semitism, namely, combatting anti-Semitism.

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Israel might not be anti-Semitic precisely to leave the contested politics around Palestinian rights outside of the typical realm of contemporary anti-Semitism. The goal is to focus on clear manifestations of anti-Jewish prejudice, which, reflecting historical patterns, are often associated in their most dangerous forms with white or other right-wing nationalist groups, as the examples in Part A. The JDA's restraint in characterising the most likely sources of contemporary anti-Semitism has been a topic of criticism. But the drafters saw their role as explicating the expression of prejudice against Jews, rather than characterising or making political points about the source of such prejudice.

Regarding the critique of not saying something clearer about Palestinian rights, the JDA strives not to take a position on Israeli-Palestinian politics at all, and its drafters and signers share no common position. Rather, we believe in the importance of an open door for lively debate and disagreement on Israeli and Palestinian political issues and optimal future outcomes. If read closely, the JDA suggests in Point 12 that advocacy for a different political model or system than the current Israeli state, such as a single political entity governed and shared by current Israelis and Palestinians, should not be presumed to be anti-Semitism.

Contrary to Professor Ayyash's concern that the JDA is merely Orientalism or Zionist supremacy dressed up as liberalism, this point will likely be seen as very contentious and challenging in many Israeli and diasporic Jewish communities, and contradicts IHRA examples. This, and other examples in the document, are directed towards people seeking elucidation and policy promotion to mitigate anti-Semitism, in part by not presuming that political speech, even impolite political speech, whatever its source, is anti-Jewish, unless such speech traffics in racist portrayals of Jews as Jews.

The key principle of the document is that the JDA guidelines can help assess the overall context of a statement. Such context might well include the positionality and specific experiences of Palestinians with respect to Israeli state power, along with others, including some Jews, who bear witness to those experiences. Of course, the points around Israel and Palestine in the JDA might be read, as Professor Ayyash does, in ways quite distinct from its goals and context by people of varying positionality, particularly positionality not directly centred around the internal politics of Jewish and other political efforts to combat anti-Semitism.

In the end, the JDA is not, and cannot be, a document that addresses Palestinian, or any, political issues directly, or improves Palestinian rights. The JDA's only point of intersection with Palestinian politics is its refusal to characterise any statement strongly critical of Israeli politics or practices as inherently or necessarily carrying with it the taint of anti-Semitism. And this refusal is backed by the weight of a diverse, multinational, representative group of respected scholars of Judaism, anti-Semitism and the Middle East.

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Because of this, while the JDA is unlikely to affect Palestinian-Israeli politics, it is part of an increased opening for political positions critical of Israel and/or supportive of Palestinians among Jews and the general public in the US. This important trend has accelerated in light of the recent Israel-Gaza conflict. The JDA's goal taking on the global threat of anti-Jewish prejudice, in a way that can be useful, without being an overly broad instrument to chill political speech about Israel, is ambitious. Based on similar concerns around Orientalism that Professor Ayash implies, for the JDA to aspire further to take a stand on Palestine, in my judgement, would be inappropriate. Yet it may help clear the way for others to do so.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.



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