

## **INQUIRY INTO ANTISEMITISM IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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**Date Received:** 1 April 2025

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I am a Jewish woman who lives in the inner west in Sydney. I am aware that there have been antisemitic actions and messaging throughout Sydney, including in my area, but I have not, to my knowledge, been the victim of antisemitism. I am not observant and I do not attend a shul, but I am open about my Jewish identity and readily recognisable as a Jew.

I am troubled by the recent adoption by Australian universities of a new definition of antisemitism that could serve to limit criticism of or debate about the actions of the Israeli government. Indeed, the conflation of any statement critical of the Israeli government with antisemitism is untenable and even illogical. Israel is a democracy; its own opposition party could hardly be called antisemitic!

Nor do I believe that criticism of the actions of the Israeli government should necessarily be labelled anti-Zionist. To use the definition provided by historian Simon Schama, anyone who believes in Israel's right to exist should be considered a Zionist. That doesn't mean that one must also endorse the actions of its government. I would certainly call myself a Zionist according to that definition.

As a Zionist and a Jew, surely I cannot be accused of being antisemitic. And yet my views are the same as those who have been accused of antisemitism: I decry the actions of Israel in Gaza and am appalled by the suffering of the Palestinians. Nor does my sympathy for the Palestinians in Gaza mean that I was not also horrified by the actions of Hamas on 7 October 2023.

What I am observing is a profound lack of subtlety in the discussion in this country about antisemitism and Israel. I agonised about becoming a signatory to the Jewish Council of Australia – not because I feared any repercussions from antisemites, but because I feared that I would hurt and offend members of my own community, Australia's Jews. Reducing Jewish thought to a single 'approved' approach to Israel is fundamentally absurd when one considers the great store that Jewish scholarship and Talmudic study have always placed on respectful intellectual debate.

This reductive approach distorts our own politics, encouraging voters to view a party or political leader through a limited anti- or pro-semitic lens. It also makes me, as a Jew, less safe. It is a terrible irony that limiting the opportunities for sensible and informed debate about the policies and actions of a foreign government fuels extremism and social division. Encouraging people to pick a side means that they ignore the complexity of the situation and their own compassion, and demonise anyone who thinks differently.

Simply, not all Jews think the same; to assume otherwise is fundamentally racist. Many of us are appalled by the behaviour of the Israeli government under Benjamin Netanyahu. To feel compassion for the Palestinians and to call for the end of the war and a two-states solution is not to deny the terrible actions of Hamas on 7 October 2023 and the awful fact that many hostages have still not been released. The conflation of opposition to the actions of the Israeli government with antisemitism is lazy, uninformed and dangerous, because such simplistic thinking is more likely to lead to genuine antisemitism and racism.

***Dr Selina Samuels, Sydney, 1 April 2025***