



Senate

Paper Title	QMUL Restrictions on Freedom of Expression regarding the State of Israel
Outcome requested	<p>Senate is asked to consider a paper from Professor Yossef Rapoport, Professor of Islamic History, School of Society and Environment.</p> <p>The paper recommends the removal of specific restrictions on freedom of speech regarding State of Israel adopted by QMUL Senate in 2020 as part of IHRA definition of antisemitism.</p>
Points for Senate members to note and further information	<p>Senate adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism in October 2020, with additional caveats recommended by the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2016: IHRA working definition of antisemitism</p> <p>Professor Rapoport notes the following for Senate's information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• State of Israel has committed grave and well-documented war crimes in Gaza over the past two years;• Academics, journalists and politicians worldwide, including many prominent Jewish and Israeli figures, view these crimes as part of enduring racist policies inherent to the State of Israel, and frequently and instructively compare specific crimes to aspects of Nazi policies;• State of Israel emphatically denies Palestinian right to self-determination, yet the denial of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state is designated as hate speech by QMUL;• Recent Office for Students guidelines require universities to ensure robust discussion can take place without fear of censorship of students, staff or external speakers expressing lawful opinions;• Therefore, QMUL Senate's designation of specific lawful critiques of the State of Israel as antisemitic is legally untenable; limits the ability of QMUL community from participating in a key debate of our generation; and is in breach of QMUL commitment to free speech.
Questions for Senate to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are the restrictions on free speech adopted by Senate in 2020 still tenable, considering the shifting global public debate on Israel, the explicit policies of the Israeli government, and the war crimes committed in Gaza?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the illustrative examples included in the IHRA definition of antisemitism, as adopted by Senate, an infringement of Department of Education new guidelines on free speech?
Regulatory/statutory reference points	<p>QMUL Code of Practice on Free Speech, November 2023. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-speech-rules-to-protect-academic-freedom-come-into-force (August 2025) IHRA working definition of antisemitism</p>
Strategy and risk	<p>Strategy: Free Speech and Academic Freedom are fundamental to the university's academic mission (QMUL Code of Practice on Free Speech).</p> <p>Risks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - failure to comply with Office for Students regulatory guidance (July 2025) on freedom of speech - Failure to comply with QMUL Code of Practice on Free Speech (November 2023)
Reporting/consideration route for the paper	Item on Senate Agenda
Authors	Professor Yossef Rapoport
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October 8, 2025

To:

Yasmin Smits
Executive Governance Officer
Queen Mary University of London

QMUL Restrictions on Freedom of Expression regarding the State of Israel

In October 2020, QMUL Senate adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which imposes restrictions on freedom of speech regarding the State of Israel. Specifically, its illustrative examples of antisemitic speech include “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis” and “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g. by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour”.

In light of the grave, widely documented war crimes committed by the State of Israel in Gaza and the West Bank since October 2023, these restrictions on freedom of speech are untenable. They deprive the QMUL community of essential tools to fully describe and analyse the reality on the ground in Israel-Palestine, provide an unacceptable immunity to the State of Israel and curtail the imagining of an alternative future based on equality and justice.

“Claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour”

Since February 2025, the State of Israel has made the ethnic cleansing of Gaza its explicit policy. The Israeli PM has supported the ‘voluntary relocation’ of two million Palestinians of Gaza to third countries ([Jewish Chronicle, 22 May 2025](#)). Israel has pursued this goal by making Gaza [unsuitable to human habitation](#) - through widely documented mass starvation, systematic destruction of the built environment, and targeting of medical and public infrastructure.

In my view, and it is also a mainstream view in current academic analysis of Israel-Palestine, these policies should be viewed as structural features of the State of Israel. According to this analysis, policies in Gaza are an extension of the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians in 1948 and the systematic physical destruction of their former communities. They are also consistent with the denial of citizenship rights to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza since 1967, which [the International Court of Justice ruled as violating the international prohibition on racial segregation and apartheid](#).

For decades, Palestinians consistently argued that the State of Israel is predicated on the continuous dispossession of Palestinians and the preservation of Jewish political domination. Israeli actions in Gaza are bearing this out. It therefore follows, in my view, that the State of Israel – not as an abstract Jewish state, but rather as an actual historical phenomenon over the past eighty years – is indeed a racist endeavour.

Yet, this plausible, widespread and evidence-based analysis is currently designated by QMUL as hate speech. As an institution, QMUL should be fostering the debate – on

all sides - and not restricting it. For many staff and students at QMUL, the current limitations on free speech give the impression that they are not allowed to speak the reality of what they see.

Moreover, in [July 2024 the Israeli parliament overwhelmingly passed a resolution rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state](#). While the official policy of the State of Israel is to deny Palestinians the right of self-determination, QMUL is prohibiting its staff and students from questioning the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state. This is an affront to common sense and common decency. It is an example of discrimination, as stated in QMUL Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech: “Where a university adopts a policy or practice that promotes a particular protected characteristic to the detriment of others, that may amount to unlawful discrimination.”

“Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis”

In July 2025, Israel’s Defence Minister ordered the establishment of a [‘humanitarian city’](#) in southern Gaza, in which the entire population of Gaza will be forcibly incarcerated. All around the world and in hundreds of media outlets, this plan has been compared with Nazi Ghettos and concentration camps. Such comparisons were frequently made in Israeli mainstream media. Former Israeli [PM Ehud Olmert explicitly compared the ‘humanitarian city’ to Nazi concentration camps](#), and leading Haaretz journalist [Gideon Levy compared it to Nazi Ghettos](#). In the UK, [Baroness Helena Kennedy stated that the ‘humanitarian city’ will be a mass concentration camp](#).

At QMUL, however, these intuitive, widespread comparisons are currently designated antisemitic. This is an absurd and untenable situation. If “comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis” are substantively plausible, circulate widely in mainstream media, and are adopted by leading politicians and academics within Israel and the UK, then staff and students at QMUL should be allowed to do the same.

The Implications of Freedom of Speech on Israel

The restrictions on freedom of speech passed by QMUL Senate have had implications on the ground, in Gaza and in the West Bank. The adoption of the IHRA by QMUL Senate, as part of a wider move by UK universities, gave a degree of immunity to the State of Israel. Its lethal actions are partly made possible by the knowledge that critiques of Israel could be framed as antisemitic, a tactic that has been vigorously pursued in the UK and elsewhere. QMUL Senate has been, inadvertently and indirectly, sustaining this dangerous immunity.

Freedom of speech regarding Israel has consequences. As Jewish and Palestinian histories are intertwined, [comparisons are instructive and can be means of resisting the genocide in Gaza](#). Describing the State of Israel as a racist endeavour allows staff and students at QMUL to develop alternative vision for a future not based on Jewish supremacy.

The framing of these statements as antisemitic is both wrong and unhelpful in the fight against hatred of Jews. It is both offensive and increasingly incorrect to assume that support for Israel, its policies and even its existence is characteristic of all Jews (the IHRA definition itself points to the dangers of such assumptions).

Antisemitism as hatred of Jews is on the rise in the UK. The mass adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism five years ago has not stemmed it, before and after October 2023. An effective fight against antisemitism needs to decouple and disassociate Jews from the actions of the State of Israel. QMUL's adoption of the IHRA definition with its examples does the opposite and may indeed fuel negative attitudes towards Jews.

I am a professor of Islamic history, born and raised in Israel, where I also did my military service. I spent the last thirty years researching the pre-modern and modern history of the Middle East, recently focusing on the heritage of medieval Islamic Palestine and its modern erasure. Today I am proud to be part of a QMUL group of world leading experts on Israel and Palestine.

My expertise, position, and biographical profile allow me to speak out with confidence, including on the structural racism of the State of Israel, and I will continue to do so. But freedom of speech should not depend on the identity of the speaker; all members of QMUL community should enjoy the same freedoms.

Indeed, QMUL Senate may be in breach of its commitment to free speech. Under the strengthened rules introduced by the Department of Education in August 2025, “universities must actively promote academic freedom, ensuring campuses are places where robust discussion can take place without fear of censorship of students, staff or external speakers expressing lawful opinions” ([Department of Education, 1/8/2025](#)). Any attempt by QMUL to enforce the two specific restrictions mentioned above might be quashed by the regulator and by the courts.

The removal of these restrictions on free speech is in line with [QMUL Code of Practice on Free Speech](#), passed in Council in October 2023, and which sets out the QMUL policies on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech in relation to regulatory obligations. When Council passed the Code, it anticipated a review in September 2025 that would take into consideration the phased development of regulation by the Office for Students.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism is being reconsidered across UK universities. The removal of its restriction on free speech is already being considered at the [University of Edinburgh](#). Moreover, [The independent inquiry into antisemitism at Goldsmiths' college](#), led by Mohinderpal Sethi K.C., concluded in May 2025 that the claim that Israel is a ‘racist endeavour’ could not be regarded as axiomatically antisemitic (#105).

QMUL Senate has several alternatives to its current policy: it may decide to adopt the IHRA definition with the exception of these specific examples or all examples; adopt the widely accepted Jerusalem [Declaration on Antisemitism](#), which specifically declares that “evidence-based criticism of Israel as a state” is not antisemitic; or adopt a [legalist policy](#) in which QMUL no longer impedes the communication of otherwise legal messages solely on the grounds of their provocative content.

QMUL Senate should remove its untenable restrictions on freedom of speech regarding Israel and commit that no member of QMUL community will be subject to disciplinary action for comparing Israeli policies to that of the Nazis, or for describing Israel as a racist endeavour. It is with the lifting of these restrictions that QMUL community will be able to fully participate in developing an alternative vision for a future for the shared land.

Sincerely,

Yossef Rapoport
Professor of Islamic history