

Harvard agrees to controversial definition of antisemitism in settling lawsuits

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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A student protester against the war in Gaza walks past tents and banners in an encampment in Harvard Yard, at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on April 25, 2024. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)

Harvard University has settled two lawsuits with Jewish groups that claimed the school had not taken appropriate steps to keep its campus from becoming a hostile environment for Jewish and Israeli students in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, attacks in southern Israel.

Harvard agreed to an unspecified monetary payout, and to hire an administrator to consult on all complaints of antisemitism and to pursue a new partnership with an

Israeli university. The school also agreed to draft an annual report for the next five years that details its response to discrimination and harassment.

As part of the settlement, Harvard also agreed to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's [definition of antisemitism](#) when investigating complaints. The controversial definition, which critics say quashes dissent of Israel, offers among several examples of antisemitism the claim that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavor.

Previously, Harvard's policies barred any discrimination based on religion, national origin, or ancestry.

The university also must post on its website the following statement: "For many Jewish people, Zionism is a part of their Jewish identity. Conduct that would violate the Non-Discrimination Policy if targeting Jewish or Israeli people can also violate the policy if directed toward Zionists."

"We are committed to ensuring our Jewish community is embraced, respected, and can thrive at Harvard," a Harvard [statement](#) said. "We are resolute in our efforts to confront antisemitism and will continue to implement robust steps to maintain a welcoming, open, and safe campus environment where every student feels a sense of belonging. Today's settlement reflects our dedication to this mission."

The suits were brought by the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law and Jewish Americans for Fairness in Education as debate over the Israel-Hamas conflict divided Harvard's campus early last year. Separately, the university was sued by Students Against Antisemitism, which accused it of not addressing antisemitic harassment of students, in violation of federal civil rights laws.

Harvard has faced stiff criticism for its handling of campus protests. Immediately after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, more than 30 student groups posted an open letter that held Israel "entirely responsible." Later, the university's president, Claudine Gay, resigned after giving testimony in a congressional hearing in which she was perceived as not responding forcefully enough to allegations of antisemitism. In February 2024, the US Department of Education opened an investigation into possible discrimination against Arab American students.

Forty-four [states](#) have taken up the IHRA definition of antisemitism, either passing it into law or adopting it by proclamation, resolution or executive order, according to

the Foundation for Middle East Peace.

Last year, the US House of Representatives passed a bill called the Antisemitism Awareness Act that would codify the IHRA definition. It was not taken up in the Senate, but now that the upper chamber is Republican-led it may resurface. President Donald Trump has said that colleges “must end the antisemitism propaganda” or lose federal support.

Legal experts, academics and liberal politicians have been sharply critical of the IHRA definition, saying it is an effort to stifle speech related to Israel and to delegitimize and continue to deny Palestinians rights.

Shabbos Kestenbaum, a recent graduate of Harvard’s Divinity School who had initially joined the Students Against Antisemitism lawsuit, did not join the settlement and is continuing his own separate suit against the school. He appeared at last year’s Republican National Convention denouncing Harvard. —Religion News Service