

Poland quietly recognized the IHRA antisemitism definition. Critics aren't impressed

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A Polish government ministry released a statement online earlier this month saying that Poland recognizes the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, a move meant to coincide with an international Holocaust forum in Sweden.

Less than two months after recalling its ambassador from Tel Aviv amid Israeli accusations of Holocaust revisionism, Poland quietly endorsed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism earlier this month, in a low-key announcement that was missed by most media outlets in both countries.

In a statement released on the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport website, Poland announced that it “recognizes the IHRA’s working, legally nonbinding definition of antisemitism as an important and self-evident point related to counteracting this phenomenon.”

The statement was timed to coincide with the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism, which was held in the Swedish city on October 13.

The move comes as Jerusalem and Warsaw are locked in an ongoing spat over Warsaw’s recent adoption of a controversial measure curtailing Holocaust-related restitution claims. That sparked Israeli allegations of state-sponsored antisemitism and the withdrawal of ambassadors from both nations.

Full diplomatic relations have not been restored since both countries recalled their ambassadors in August.

Issues related to the Holocaust have strained relations between the two nations for several years. In 2019, Warsaw pulled out of an important diplomatic conference in Jerusalem after then-Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz said that Poles “suckled antisemitism with their mother’s milk.”

The cancellation of the summit was a stunning reversal from the previous year, when then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to endorse a Polish narrative of the war years and released a joint statement with his Polish counterpart, Mateusz Morawiecki, defending Poland’s wartime record. That statement was itself an effort to repair ruptured ties after Jerusalem condemned Poland for a controversial law that made it illegal to hold the Polish nation, people or state responsible for Nazi war crimes.

“Poland has endorsed the IHRA working definition of antisemitism through the statement of the Culture Ministry and it is reflected on the IHRA website,” the Polish Embassy in Tel Aviv said, in response to an inquiry regarding the possible diplomatic implications of the move.

“Poland’s engagement in combating antisemitism is as valid as ever and is not influenced by the current difficulties in Polish-Israeli relations. This principle applies also to the endorsement of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism,” the embassy added. “The works on the definition implementation plans are ongoing.”

But while the Holocaust alliance welcomed the move, with Secretary-General Kathrin Meyer calling it a welcome step that could “empower governments and civil society to better address Holocaust distortion and the antisemitism it fuels,” others were less enthused about its significance.

Israel’s Foreign Ministry declined to comment on the statement, while Rafal Pankowski, a Polish academic and founder of the “Never Again” Association, called it “largely a meaningless move as long as it does not translate into real action against antisemitism.

“Antisemitic stereotypes and arguments have become common in Polish media and politics in the last years, and the ruling party has contributed to it quite a lot,” Pankowski said, accusing the Culture Ministry of “subsidizing far-right nationalist and antisemitic groups” from public funds. He also speculated that Warsaw had been seeking “a way to counter international criticism around the restitution law.”

He added: “Inside the country, it has no practical impact, I’m afraid. There was no big announcement and hardly anybody noticed it.”

Piotr Kadlczak, the former head of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland, agreed. “Due to the present situation in Poland, such a statement was not widely noticed in the country. I would say that it doesn’t mean anything special,” he said. “After all, Polish authorities were always officially condemning antisemitism – today as well as in 1968,” he said, referring to that year’s purge of Jews by the then-ruling communist regime.

Former Israeli ambassador to Warsaw Zvi Ravner said that while the statement may have been a signal that the Poles “are willing to renew some kind of dialogue with Israel,” it was unclear if such a “low-key” statement “would be sufficient to renew any dialogue, as they made it quite clear that they are not going to submit to the Israeli demand to annul that law.”

Polish Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, however, argued that despite the current nadir in relations, Warsaw’s endorsement of the IHRA definition remains significant.

“It is important whenever a government accepts and supports the IHRA definition of antisemitism,” he said. “In spite of the recent tensions, by accepting the IHRA definition of antisemitism, this will continue to strengthen the very positive relations with Israel and the Jewish people that has blossomed since the fall of communism in 1989.”

JTA contributed to this report.

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