

Antisemitism and the Attack on Civil Society

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Civil society is core to democracy. That civil society organizations in the United States today face a specific, urgent threat means that democracy itself is under attack.

[Multiple times](#) when the last Congress was in session, members introduced legislation that would empower the treasury secretary to strip nonprofits of their tax-exempt status if they are deemed to be engaging in “terrorism,” a term open to political interpretation and application.

In February, President Trump signed an [executive order](#) to “stop funding NGOs which undermine the national interest.” But like “terrorism,” “national interest” can be defined by political actors to serve their own interests: not to protect Americans, but to attack civil society organizations when they try to hold those in power to account.



Photo by Andrew Harnik via Getty Images

The threat, then, is that fears of safety and security are preyed upon to dismantle checks against power. But we can meet that threat.

We should be prepared to remain engaged as citizens who are part of the democratic process. Groups and outlets like [Democracy Docket](#) track election litigation to ensure we can continue to participate in democracy through voting. But democracy doesn't only happen during elections. The Trump administration is attacking what happens *between* elections, too.

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This brings us back to attacks on nonprofits under the guise of fighting terrorism. To be clear, support for terrorism and extremism is never justified. And there are measures in place to guarantee that those who promote it are sanctioned. Indeed, it is and must remain illegal for nonprofits to support terrorism. Yet the proposals like the ones mentioned above manipulate the term "terrorism," using it for political purposes to expand the powers of the executive and trample on the constitutional rights of those who disagree with the administration on issues related to foreign policy without providing for due process.

Organizations engaged in pro-Palestinian protest face the most immediate risk. But history suggests such powers, once granted, expand beyond their original targets. Foundations that support pro-Palestinian organizations could be next. We've already seen this pattern with other groups. A 2020 police guide suggested that Black Lives Matter protesters should be [treated](#) like terrorists. The same logic could extend to NGOs supporting racial justice or groups—including Jewish ones—that support refugees and asylum seekers.

This threat to NGOs is particularly concerning given the broader political context. On one hand, the administration seeks expanded powers to target NGOs, claiming this will help fight antisemitism. Yet, as reporting by ProPublica [shows](#), this same administration is also creating a more permissive environment for white nationalists, for whom antisemitism is a key ideological component.

Antisemitism and all forms of racism and discrimination must be confronted — by all of us, together, from wherever on the political spectrum these hatreds arise. Empowering an administration that encourages white nationalism and cracks down on civil society only harms that fight and, indeed, creates new dangers. For when such an administration gains power to target NGOs, it can target any NGO whose agenda is at odds with its policies. This not only threatens to drive a wedge between Jewish communities and other allies in civil society. It is a danger to a democratic, pluralistic, liberal, nation and is a threat to the safety of everyone, including Jews.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ④ Our elected representatives must speak out against hate and oppose legislation that would empower this administration to go after nonprofits. Our community leaders must speak up and out against such efforts as well.
- ④ Congress should pass legislation on evaluating and reporting hate crimes and provide oversight on the implementation of hate crime data collection and enforcement.
- ④ Congress should also work to address white supremacy in law enforcement and authorize funding for interagency coordination against hate crimes. These efforts combat hate without attacking civil society.