

## Trump Doesn't Give a Damn About Jews

Campus antisemitism is real, but the president's vandalistic attack isn't about justice or discrimination.

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By [Amir Goldberg](#) and [Barbara J. Risman](#) March 19, 2025

The pervasiveness and intensity of antisemitism on American campuses, unearthed by the war in Gaza, surprised us. It is not that we were oblivious to the existence of antisemitism. We heard "[Jews will not replace us](#)" chants in Charlottesville, Va., and saw the massacre of Jewish worshipers at the [Tree of Life synagogue](#), in Pittsburgh. Yet, despite being on the faculty of American colleges for many years, we underestimated how deeply entrenched antisemitism is among the presumably progressive academic left. We failed to anticipate the simplistic zeal with which some of our colleagues were willing to demonize Zionism, and its Jewish supporters, as a uniquely evil force in the contemporary global order. Instead, we learned that, as Jewish faculty members, while we are hated for not being white enough by white supremacists, we were seen as "white-settler colonialists" by progressive fundamentalists.

We recognize that student protesters are acting out of a legitimate and genuine objection to Israel's actions in Gaza. But we watched with dismay as many were radicalized into haranguing Jewish peers with conspiratorial antizionism, sometimes after absorbing it in their professors' classes. As sociologists, our ultimate moment of reckoning arrived when members of the American Sociological Association, our professional colleagues, passed a unilateral and intellectually dishonest resolution last spring. While the resolution purportedly called for a ceasefire in Gaza, it ignored the existence of Hamas and portrayed Israel as an innately murderous colonialist enterprise. We had both publicly, and unsuccessfully, tried to defeat the resolution, which we felt was hostile to Jews who do not pass the litmus test of renouncing Israel's right to exist.

You might therefore conclude that we were relieved when President Trump recently began pursuing a [series of steps to combat antisemitism](#) on college campuses. We were not. We are alarmed by these measures. We believe they are dangerous, hypocritical, and cynical. The plight of Jewish students and faculty members deserves better than to be exploited as a cudgel by an authoritarian presidency, hellbent on retribution and hostile to academic free speech. We fear that the administration's actions will only fuel antisemitism by making Jews the scapegoats in Trump's war on academe.

We have good reasons to be skeptical about Trump's motivations. If he truly cared about the well-being of Jews, he would start by uprooting antisemitism among his own ranks. Instead, his vice president [recently encouraged Germans to vote for the Alternative for Germany, or AfD](#), a party seeking to erase the historical memory of the Holocaust, while Elon Musk, his senior adviser for government efficiency, [ridiculed critics](#) who were incensed by his apparent Nazi salute.

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Trump is using the justified grievances of Jewish students as an excuse to achieve two goals. The first is to cripple academe. The most blatant example, so far, emerged last week, when the administration cited “continued inaction in the face of persistent harassment of Jewish students” as the reason for [canceling](#) \$400 million in federal funds to Columbia University. It later laid out a set of [incipiently authoritarian and unprecedented demands](#) as preconditions for negotiating this cancellation, and [warned](#) 60 additional colleges that they are next. This fiscal warfare has now become systemized. Last month, the [National Institutes of Health announced that it will drastically reduce administrative funding to universities; the losses total in the billions.](#)

Trump’s second goal is to subdue his critics through fear and persecution. Currently, the administration is [going](#) after student protesters, most brazenly by arresting and attempting to deport Mahmoud Khalil, an American permanent resident with a green card, who participated in anti-Israeli protests at Columbia. To be sure, we found these protesters’ conspiratorial rhetoric deeply offensive and laced with antisemitic tropes. Nevertheless, we insist that students, irrespective of their citizenship status, have the right to express these opinions, as long as they do not break the law. Khalil deserves due process, not Putinesque intimidation.

The administration’s racketeering tactics make clear that it seeks to coerce colleges into curtailing academic freedom. The long-term consequences will be disastrous. If foreign students fear for their freedom in the United States, we will no longer be able to attract the best graduate students to our institutions. Why would anyone, American or foreign, want to pursue an advanced degree and put themselves at the risk of legal persecution and job insecurity? Throughout the 20th century, the United States built unparalleled centers of knowledge production, which have immensely benefited the world and helped make the the country an economic powerhouse. Destroying this amazing enterprise will benefit no one, Jewish or not.

We do not know who is next on Trump’s target list. The predatory rationale now is “antisemitism.” It is not difficult to imagine that soon other excuses will be used to go after, for example, critics of Trump’s Ukraine strategy or those who study systematic racial or gender inequality.

The administration’s vigorous actions in the name of “nondiscrimination” embody this moment’s most grotesque irony: In the name of defending Jews, the Trump administration is adopting a particularist agenda — focused on the welfare of a single ethnic group — while starting a concerted campaign to dismantle colleges’ efforts to support diversity, equity, and inclusion on the grounds that those institutions are, well, particularist.

Trump and his acolytes are putting Jews like us in an impossible double-bind. Either we support their authoritarian tactics, or we find ourselves objecting to task forces designed to target antisemitism. We reject this false choice. Ending equity and inclusion programs designed to support diverse student bodies while at the same time creating new programs to end antisemitism will only sow racial divisions among students and faculty — and will serve as additional proof for those who already believe Jews are unfairly advantaged or innately corrupt.

There is an alternative. Jewish faculty must resist the temptation to side with the Trump administration’s task force on antisemitism, even if we feel justifiably betrayed by some of our colleagues who appeared elated at the sight of our relatives and friends butchered on October 7, 2023. Our non-Jewish peers, in turn, must seriously acknowledge the systemic existence of

antisemitism on American campuses, and act to uproot it. We will need to work together, and in good faith, in defining the boundaries between legitimate speech and antisemitism. This is an arduous task. But we cannot afford to outsource it to the government's blunt and destructive operatives.

We imagine that many in Trump's administration are genuinely, and justifiably, concerned about the well-being of Jewish students on American campuses, and the Manichean anti-Israeli propaganda intellectualized in certain corners of academe. To them we say: No, thank you. We trust that the overwhelming majority of faculty members and academic administrators understand the gravity of the moment, and will coalesce to address the problems of antisemitism. We cannot afford to acquiesce to those who, in the name of making America great again, want to destroy rather than reform it.