

Written Testimony of Kevin Rachlin
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Before the

United States Senate Judiciary Committee

Never to be Silent: Stemming the Tide of Antisemitism in America
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Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Durbin and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the troubling persistence of antisemitism in America and how we as a society can effectively stem this rising tide of hatred. I am the Washington Director of the Nexus Project, which works directly with communities across the country to understand and address antisemitism through research, education and coalition-building with the express purpose of mobilizing an effective response to antisemitism across society.

Recent data from the FBI's Hate Crime Statistics report shows a deeply concerning trend of rising antisemitism nationwide. Jewish Americans, who represent approximately 2% of the U.S. population, were targeted in nearly 60% of all religious-based hate crimes in the most recent comprehensive data. Even more alarming, these numbers represent a 20% increase from the previous year's reporting, indicating the problem is growing, not abating. On college campuses, surveys indicate that nearly two-thirds of Jewish students have reported experiencing or witnessing antisemitism during the past academic year.

These statistics on their own are alarming, but they only begin to scratch the surface. The realistic fear of antisemitism has become commonplace for many American Jews. Having to look over your shoulder, questioning whether to wear a Star of David necklace or kippah in public, or wondering if your child's school is adequately secured against potential violence is now part of everyday life for too many Jewish Americans. Only the most cynical among us would lack empathy for what our fellow citizens are experiencing simply because of their religious and ethnic identity.

This problem did not begin with the brutal Hamas-led October 7th, 2023 terror attacks on Israel, nor is it limited to our educational institutions. In order to address antisemitism effectively, Congress must listen to the voices, needs and concerns across the American Jewish community. The administration and Congress should not be talking "about us without us." This means advancing policy that will reduce antisemitism effectively in ways that bring communities together and don't seek to pit Jews against the partners we need to feel safe and to secure the inclusive democracy that we seek.

I've attached to my testimony a list of resources that I hope Committee Members and their staff will find useful about antisemitism and its ever-evolving manifestations across the political spectrum. From the "Great Replacement Theory" to antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jewish control of banking and media, to instances of antisemitic rhetoric that sometimes appears within criticism of Israeli policies, no corner of society is immune. That's why the Nexus Project creates resources to distinguish legitimate political discourse from discriminatory antisemitism, to equip professionals to effectively counter antisemitism wherever it appears.

In recent months, the distinction between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism has been particularly relevant amid campus protests related to Israel's war in Gaza. Some of these protests have included rhetoric that clearly crosses the boundary from political criticism to antisemitism, as defined by the Nexus guidelines. Chants of "f*ck the Jews," signs telling Jews to "go back to Poland," and slogans that deploy ancient antisemitic tropes about Jewish power and control are not legitimate criticism of Israeli policy but rather attacks on Jews as a group. These incidents are clear, chilling and enough to cause concern. Many on campuses wholesale deny that there is antisemitism at some protests, and that denial is wrong and even undermines the causes of the protesters—it helps no one. At the same time, overbroad and vague standards risk chilling free speech and can make it more difficult to counter and prevent antisemitism. First, shutting down legitimate criticism and conflating it with antisemitism and extremism leaves the most extreme, violent, hateful rhetoric at the fore. Second, crafting policy as though anti-Israel sentiment is the only source of antisemitism is counterproductive. We must not forget that some of the deadliest antisemitic attacks in recent American history—such as the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue massacre where the shooter explicitly targeted Jews for allegedly helping immigrants "invade" America, and the 2017 Charlottesville rally where white supremacists chanted "Jews will not replace us"—were fueled by Great Replacement Theory and other right-wing antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jewish power. This confluence of trends—from Great Replacement Theory on the right to antisemitic rhetoric appearing in some campus protests—has distorted what genuine efforts to combat antisemitism should look like, replacing careful analysis with partisan agenda-setting that ultimately fails to protect Jewish communities.

Instead of embedding protection of Jews into American policy, it harmfully puts debates about Jewish safety into the realm of partisan political debate and the intractable culture war. And that's more than an accident. What we're witnessing is the cynical weaponization of Jewish pain to advance other people's political agendas. Plans such as the Heritage Foundation's so-called "Project Esther" represents a dangerous manipulation of legitimate Jewish fear of antisemitism to expand government control over civil society and limit fundamental freedoms. Project Esther, released in late 2024, is the Heritage Foundation's purported "national strategy" to counter antisemitism that primarily focuses on targeting Palestinian solidarity movements and restricting immigration rather than addressing the actual drivers of antisemitic violence and discrimination.

This initiative was written without input from the many Jewish community organizations whose experience and expertise matters. It was endorsed by no major Jewish organization and promotes measures that threaten the very democratic values and rule of law that have historically protected Jewish communities in America. It paints a sweeping portrait of a vast conspiracy of civil society organizations as a "Hamas Support Network," with no evidence of their actual connections to antisemitism.

The recent Executive Order #14188 encouraging universities to monitor political activities of international students turns educational institutions into extensions of immigration enforcement. Measures like the wildly misnamed Stop Terror-Financing and Tax Penalties on American Hostages Act would grant sweeping powers to the Executive to designate nonprofits as "terrorist supporting organizations" without adequate due process protections. These approaches not only violate democratic principles but may actually exacerbate antisemitism by fostering division and resentment on campuses, alienating potential allies in the fight against hate, and redirecting energy from proven educational and community-building solutions to surveillance and punishment.

Let me be clear: Supporting terror organizations like Hamas is wrong. And stopping terrorist financing is a legitimate governmental concern that should be addressed through existing legal frameworks with proper judicial oversight. However, these new sweeping approaches abolish fundamental due process rights that helped make anti-terrorism laws effective and viable, not weaker. Project Esther and its policy ideas represent political theater that endangers the very values that have protected Jewish communities throughout American history. True antisemitism - the hatred of Jews as Jews - thrives in authoritarian environments where civil liberties are curtailed, not in spaces of robust, protected democratic discourse.

Jews have always been safest in pluralistic democracies. We must balance protecting all Americans' right to live free from discrimination and harassment with the bedrock principles of free speech. Unfortunately, we continue to see an overemphasis on punitive measures rather than on educational and community-building approaches that can prevent antisemitic incidents from occurring in the first place.

While appropriate enforcement of anti-discrimination policies is necessary, it is never sufficient. We need to work collectively to promote critical thinking about complex issues, invest in programs that bring communities together across differences, teach recognition of antisemitism, and build inclusive communities.

I urge this committee to consider several practical actions that would genuinely help combat antisemitism:

1. **Enact evidence-based policy.** Evidence from organizations like ADL as well as intelligence agencies across both Republican and Democratic administrations have found that the overwhelming majority of antisemitic and extremist violence is committed by homegrown extremists, not foreign students. Our resources and policy should be based on the reality of the threat.
2. **Listen to American Jews and reject initiatives that exploit antisemitism to erode civil liberties** and create a more dangerous environment for all minorities, including Jews. Even at a moment of alarm in the Jewish community, more than [100 Jewish organizations joined together to oppose recent attacks on democratic norms and values](#) — including the pardoning of January 6 insurrectionists and the freezing of federal funds under the control of unelected allies — attacks that fundamentally threaten the freedoms and safety of Jews and of all Americans.
3. **Support serious action like an updated Countering Antisemitism Act instead of focusing on efforts like the Antisemitism Awareness Act which risk criminalizing antisemitic speech in ways that chill legitimate debate.** The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, while created as an educational tool, becomes problematic when used as an enforcement mechanism because it conflates legitimate criticism of Israeli government policies with antisemitism; this concern was validated by a recent federal court ruling in Texas which found that the state's implementation of IHRA was likely unconstitutional as it could suppress protected First Amendment speech by chilling legitimate political expression about Israel and Palestine. The pursuit to codify definitions like IHRA as enforcement mechanisms rather than educational tools does nothing to meaningfully protect Jewish Americans. **The fight over definitions is a distraction.** Instead of educating and acting against offensive conduct, we instead argue about whether speech or conduct is properly defined as antisemitism. The consequence is that nobody focuses on the underlying hate itself. With all of the rush to adopt so called definitions,

we see no reduction in antisemitism. That's paying lip service to the fight to make it look like we are doing something. Instead, let's focus on education and building alliances.

4. **Don't shut down existing investigations and tools. Provide adequate resources** Don't shut down existing investigations and tools. Provide adequate resources to law enforcement and civil rights agencies to promptly investigate all forms of discrimination and hate crimes, including antisemitism, with appropriate due process protections. Plans to eliminate the Department of Education, including its Office for Civil Rights (OCR), are especially concerning as OCR currently manages a significant backlog of discrimination investigations, including many related to antisemitism. Dismantling this office without a clear plan for how these critical investigations would continue represents an abandonment of civil rights protections when they are most needed. Additionally, this means funding bipartisan supported initiatives like the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which was recently threatened by the rapid cuts in government spending.
5. **Advance educational initiatives** that promote understanding of antisemitism's historical manifestations and contemporary forms across the political spectrum. True security for Jewish communities comes through education and coalition-building, not through divisive approaches that pit communities against each other.
6. **Resist efforts to erase or replace the National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism**, which was created with input from more than 1,000 Jewish community stakeholders and contains detailed recommendations across every federal agency. This comprehensive strategy represents the most extensive effort ever undertaken by the federal government to address antisemitism. Claims that initiatives like Project Esther represent a credible alternative national strategy are wrong, as is any suggestion that it has broad Jewish communal support. It does not. Any serious approach to combating antisemitism must build upon, not discard, the National Strategy as a foundation of broad Jewish community input and expertise.

Our Jewish communities recognize how debates about their wellbeing have been politicized. In consultations with community leaders nationwide, they've expressed frustration with being used as political pawns while their actual needs for security, education, and appropriate enforcement of existing anti-discrimination policies go unaddressed.

If Congress wants to show it is serious about stemming the tide of antisemitism in America, it must reject approaches that exploit Jewish fear while simultaneously undermining the democratic values that are our best defense against hatred. **The Jewish community deserves better than performative outrage coupled with counterproductive policies.**

I'd like to close by addressing something we rarely discuss in these hearings. Throughout the past year and into this one, we've consistently talked about "combating" or "fighting" antisemitism. But I want to challenge us to think bigger - to ask a question many of us are afraid to pose: What would it take to actually reduce, marginalize or even end antisemitism?

This is a difficult question because answering it honestly requires us to acknowledge which strategies have worked and which haven't, even when that means making partners or allies uncomfortable. It requires examining evidence rather than ideology. It requires looking next to us and being to acknowledge which allies are committed to this effort or who play the part. It means understanding antisemitism not just as

individual acts of hatred but as a systemic phenomenon with deep historical roots that manifests differently across different communities and contexts.

Ending antisemitism means building a society where Jewish safety doesn't depend on surveillance or censorship, but on genuine understanding and solidarity. It means creating spaces where disagreement about international politics doesn't spill over into hatred of people based on their identity. It means recognizing that antisemitism not only harms Jews but also undermines the democratic values that protect all Americans.

This is ambitious work, but it is not impossible. By promoting civil discourse, critical thinking skills, and inclusion efforts that include making Jews and all groups feel welcome and safe - while rejecting attempts to weaponize antisemitism for partisan gain - we can genuinely address the troubling rise of antisemitism in America. I stand ready to work with this committee to make that vision a reality.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

Appendix: Resources on Antisemitism

Antisemitism Explainers and Guides

- [A Campus Guide To Identifying Antisemitism In A Time Of Perplexity](#), The Nexus Project, September 2024
- [A Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism](#), Truah, the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, August 2024
- [Antisemitism in our Past and Present: Short video](#), Berkeley Center for Jewish Studies
- [Antisemitism x Democracy](#) - Aspen Institute Landscape Analysis, 2024
- [Dismantling Antisemitism](#), July 2024 - a message guide for progressive communities
- [Great Replacement Theory: Here's What Jews Need to Know about White Supremacy](#) - AJC May 2022
- [Guide to Identifying Antisemitism in Debates About Israel](#), The Nexus Project, 2022
- [Video Explainer Series](#) by Yair Rosenberg, The Atlantic
- [What is Antisemitism](#), The Holocaust Encyclopedia, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

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US Resources

- [The U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism](#), May 2023