

PROJECT ESTHER

MAY 2025

Project Esther is a policy initiative launched by the Heritage Foundation in October 2024, aimed at countering what it describes as antisemitism in the United States, particularly targeting pro-Palestinian activism. Named after the biblical Queen Esther, the project frames the pro-Palestinian movement as a " Hamas Support Network" (HSN) and proposes aggressive measures to suppress it, including deportations, defunding universities, and legal actions against activists. Below is a detailed overview of its status, investors, supporters, and links to Donald Trump or his administration, based on available information as of May 2025.

Status of Project Esther

- **Launch and Objectives:** Unveiled on the one-year anniversary of Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, Project Esther is a 33-page blueprint designed to "extirpate the influence of the HSN from society." It accuses pro-Palestinian groups, including Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine, of being part of a global network supporting terrorism. Proposed actions include:
 - Deporting non-citizens (e.g., international students) for pro-Palestinian speech, citing "material support for terrorism."
 - Defunding universities that tolerate pro-Palestinian protests.
 - Firing faculty and staff who support such causes.
 - Using anti-racketeering and anti-terror laws to target progressive groups.
 - Purging social media of content deemed antisemitic, often equating criticism of Israel with support for Hamas.
 - Labeling progressive politicians, like Senators Bernie Sanders and Chuck Schumer, as part of the "HSN."
- **Implementation as of May 2025:** The Trump administration, which began its second term in January 2025, has adopted or mirrored at least 27 of Project Esther's 47 recommendations, according to a POLITICO analysis. Notable actions include:
 - Arrest and deportation threats against pro-Palestinian activists, such as Columbia graduate Mahmoud Khalil, a legal U.S. resident, in March 2025.
 - Threats to withhold federal funding from universities over antisemitism allegations.
 - Secretary of State Marco Rubio citing a rarely used legal provision to target legal residents for pro-Palestinian speech.
 - Efforts to revoke visas of foreign students and faculty supporting Palestinian rights.
- **Public and Media Attention:** Project Esther gained significant attention in May 2025, with coverage from The New York Times, Al Jazeera, and Mother Jones highlighting its parallels with Trump administration policies. X posts from May 18–21, 2025, note its influence, with users like @karriegaspard & @rcbregman pointing to meetings with Israeli officials and Trump allies to align strategies. However, these posts are not conclusive evidence and reflect sentiment rather than verified facts.

Investors and Supporters

- **Heritage Foundation:** The primary architect of Project Esther, the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, funded the project with a \$22 million budget for its broader initiatives, including Project 2025. Specific funding details for Project Esther are not publicly disclosed, but the Heritage Foundation sought support from Jewish foundations, with limited success.
 - A leaked pitch deck reported by The Forward in December 2024 revealed Heritage's outreach to potential donors, including a conspiracy-laden narrative targeting George Soros, the Tides Foundation, and progressive groups as "masterminds" of the HSN.

- The pitch included plans to designate groups as "terrorism support entities" (TSEs) and target Wikipedia editors for publishing allegedly antisemitic content.
- Evangelical Christian Groups: Project Esther is heavily supported by evangelical Christian organizations, particularly those tied to Christian Zionism and the New Apostolic Reformation, rather than major Jewish organizations. Key supporters include:
 - Philos Project: Led by Luke Moon, its executive director, who is a prominent figure in Project Esther.
 - Latino Coalition for Israel: Led by Mario Bramnick, an evangelical adviser to Trump, who supports the project's alignment with biblical views on Israel's right to Palestinian territories.
 - No major Jewish organizations have endorsed Project Esther, with groups like Jewish Voice for Peace explicitly opposing it, calling it a tool to suppress Palestinian liberation movements.
- Other Conservative Think Tanks: The America First Policy Institute (AFPI), founded to promote Trump's agenda, is a key supporter. AFPI's involvement is noted in Project Esther's planning, with figures like Brooke Rollins, a former Trump domestic policy chief and AFPI president, playing a role.
- Limited Jewish Support: Heritage struggled to attract Jewish donors, as reported by The Forward, due to the project's partisan focus on left-wing antisemitism while ignoring right-wing antisemitic tropes. Jewish organizations like The Forward and Haaretz criticized Project Esther for incorporating antisemitic stereotypes in its rhetoric, such as targeting Soros.

Links to Trump and His Administration

- Direct Ties to Trump Allies:
 - Victoria Coates: A former deputy national security adviser to Trump and Heritage vice president, Coates oversees Project Esther and has confirmed parallels between its proposals and Trump's actions.
 - Robert Greenway: A co-author of Project Esther, Greenway worked on the Abraham Accords during Trump's first term, linking the project to Trump's Middle East policy.
 - Bryan Leib: A member of the National Task Force to Combat Antisemitism, which shaped Project Esther, Leib praised Trump's commitment to Jewish safety during campus protests.
 - Mario Bramnick: An evangelical adviser to Trump and president of the Latino Coalition for Israel, Bramnick supports Project Esther's goals.
 - Leo Terrell: A former Fox News contributor now heading a Trump administration task force on antisemitism, Terrell collaborates with Project Esther supporters like Morton Klein of the Zionist Organization of America, who provided guidance for the blueprint.
- Trump Administration Actions: The administration's moves, such as threatening university funding and deporting activists, align closely with Project Esther's recommendations, though the White House has not officially acknowledged the project. Harrison Fields, principal deputy press secretary, stated in March 2025 that Trump's policies reflect a "core principle" of combating antisemitism and revoking visas for those supporting "terrorism and jihadism."
- Heritage Foundation's Broader Influence: Project Esther is an extension of Project 2025, a 900-page blueprint for Trump's second term, with significant overlap in personnel. At least 140 former Trump administration officials, including Russ Vought, Stephen Miller, and Ben Carson, contributed to Project 2025, and many of its policies mirror Trump's agenda. Trump nominated several Project 2025 architects, like Vought and Pam Bondi, to key roles in 2025, indicating alignment despite his public disavowals.
- Trump's Public Stance: During his 2024 campaign, Trump distanced himself from Project 2025, claiming he knew "nothing" about it or its authors, despite speaking at a 2022 Heritage event praising their work. His administration's adoption of Project Esther's tactics, such as targeting pro-Palestinian activists, suggests a closer alignment than acknowledged, though no direct evidence confirms Trump has read or endorsed Project Esther specifically.
- Connection to Jared Kushner and the Abraham Accords: Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, played a central role in the Abraham Accords, which Project Esther cites as a framework for U.S.-Israel relations. Kushner's \$2 billion investment from the Saudi PIF in 2022 and the Trump Organization's Jeddah deal with Dar Global (2024) reflect broader Saudi ties that align with the accords' economic goals. While Kushner is not directly named in Project Esther, co-author Robert Greenway's work on the accords ties the project to Trump's Middle East policy, which Kushner shaped.

Critical Perspective

Project Esther's framing of pro-Palestinian activism as a terrorist network raises serious concerns about free speech and due process. Critics, including Jewish Voice for Peace and The Forward, argue it weaponizes antisemitism charges to suppress dissent, targeting progressive groups, minorities, and even Jewish critics of Israel while ignoring right-wing antisemitism. The project's reliance on evangelical Christian groups and lack of Jewish support suggest a Christian nationalist agenda, as noted by Al Jazeera, which uses Zionism to advance white supremacist goals. Its alignment with Trump's policies, despite his disavowals, mirrors the broader Project 2025 strategy of consolidating executive power, raising fears of authoritarian overreach. On the other hand, supporters like Morton Klein argue it addresses a real threat to Jewish safety and U.S. interests, aligning with Trump's pro-Israel stance. The lack of transparency about funding and the project's donor base limits clarity on its financial backing, but its ties to Heritage and AFPI suggest significant conservative investment.

Conclusion

As of May 2025, Project Esther is actively influencing Trump administration policies, with over half its recommendations implemented or under consideration, including deportations and university funding cuts targeting pro-Palestinian activism. The Heritage Foundation, backed by evangelical Christian groups like the Philos Project and Latino Coalition for Israel, drives the project, with limited Jewish support. Key figures like Victoria Coates, Robert Greenway, and Mario Bramnick link it to Trump's orbit, and its alignment with Project 2025 underscores ties to former Trump officials. While Trump has not publicly endorsed Project Esther, its parallels with his administration's actions and the involvement of his allies, including those tied to the Abraham Accords and Kushner's Saudi deals, suggest significant influence. The project's controversial tactics and partisan framing continue to spark debate over free speech and foreign policy motives.