

Heritage Foundation struggles to find partners in fight against antisemitism

The conservative think tank launched 'Project Esther' playbook to combat antisemitism but antagonized would-be allies in the process

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On the first anniversary of the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks, one of the most venerable conservative think tanks in Washington announced a major effort to combat antisemitism. The Heritage Foundation touted what it dubbed “Project Esther” — encompassing a 33-page report and a task force that it said included dozens of organizations — as a “national strategy to counter antisemitism,” meant to be a conservative counterweight to the Biden administration’s antisemitism national strategy released in May 2023. Focused on what the report’s authors deemed the global “Hamas Support Network,” the strategy trains its eye exclusively on antisemitism emanating from left-wing, anti-Zionist spaces. Its authors described the report to *Jewish Insider* as a serious conservative effort to address antisemitism and to demonstrate that fighting antisemitism is a priority for the conservative movement — a position espoused by many of the task force’s member organizations, most of whom come from the evangelical Christian community rather than the Jewish community. But Heritage’s tactics — including criticizing the White House document that several nonpartisan Jewish organizations had a hand in writing, purposely

spurning Jewish groups in the “Project Esther” task force and ignoring concerns about antisemitism on the right — have antagonized some would-be allies.

Soon after the report was released, several high-profile organizations that Heritage claimed were affiliated with the project began to distance themselves from it.

Christians United for Israel, a powerful evangelical group, said it had nothing to do with the project after its political arm was named on a list of 57 task force participants that Heritage shared with JI.

“CUFI was not involved in this report,” said Ari Morgenstern, CUFI’s senior director of policy and communications. “There is a strong, diverse coalition of groups that fights antisemitism on both the left and right, and we are honored to stand by our allies at the Conference of Presidents, ADL, AJC and a number of other fine organizations, as we have for nearly two decades.”

The World Jewish Congress also said they had nothing to do with the report after being named by Heritage as a partner. The Hudson Institute and the Atlantic Council, two large Washington think tanks, similarly told JI they were not formally part of the coalition or involved with the report. The Republican Jewish Coalition said the group knew nothing about the Heritage report.

America First Policy Institute, a research institute with close ties to the Trump world, was named in a press release from Heritage last November announcing the national task force to combat antisemitism. But AFPI has not shared the report on social media since its release last week, and a spokesperson did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Other organizations named as members of the task force include the pro-life Family Research Council, the Faith and Freedom Coalition and the National Committee for Religious Freedom, an organization led by former Kansas Republican Sen. Sam Brownback. None of them have shared the Project Esther report.

“This is a very well-meaning effort,” said an expert at another conservative think tank in Washington. “But the writing process was a little bit one-sided and not terribly iterative. And also, while I do believe that left-wing antisemitism is a larger

systemic problem, the fact that it doesn't touch right-wing antisemitism is, I think, a mistake, because of the credibility issue."

In the year that followed Heritage's announcement of the task force in late 2023, the organization became toxic to the Trump campaign following the rollout of the now-infamous "Project 2025," a detailed document outlining policies the next Republican president should implement, including an overhaul of the federal government.

Democrats have for months tied former President Donald Trump to the document, using it as a frequent campaign talking point to paint Trump as out of step with the issues Americans care about. Trump and his campaign have attempted to disavow the project.

Following the controversy Heritage faced from Project 2025, Project Esther presented an opportunity for the group to propose policies to fight antisemitism, an issue with bipartisan appeal.

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Luke Moon, executive director of the Philos Project, a Christian organization focused on the Middle East, said the report is meant to send a signal that conservatives stand against antisemitism on all sides — even if the document did not mention examples of right-wing antisemitism. After long discussions about whether to call out popular conservative figures like Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens, who have been broadcasting antisemitic views on their platforms, the group decided against it, he said.

"Get people to sign on who are on the right and that will give a signal to the right that this is an important issue for us. We're not going to tolerate it," said Moon, an active member of the Heritage task force. "We had a long conversation several times about whether or not to, or how much energy do we spend going after, like, Tucker and Candace Owens, or do we really focus

on where the majority are right now, at least, which is these folks on campus, [Students for Justice in Palestine] and stuff.”

“We invited Jewish groups to the group, and we work with some of the Jewish groups, like ZOA, and that’s great,” James Carafano, one of the leaders of Heritage’s antisemitism task force, said of the right-wing Zionist Organization of America. “I’m not criticizing these groups for not taking antisemitism seriously, or not taking anti-Zionism seriously. I’m just saying I think that they haven’t sufficiently focused on the core of the problem.”

James Carafano, one of the leaders of Heritage’s antisemitism task force and a senior counselor to the president at the Heritage Foundation, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview on Friday that he does not think antisemitism is a problem on the American right.

“I refuse to acknowledge that that is part of the conservative movement and that they are my problem, because white supremacists are not my problem, because white supremacists are not part of being conservative,” Carafano told *J*.

Carafano stood by the antisemitism task force’s decision not to include “traditional Jewish groups.”

“We invited Jewish groups to the group, and we work with some of the Jewish groups, like ZOA, and that’s great,” Carafano said of the right-wing Zionist Organization of America. “I’m not criticizing these groups for not taking antisemitism seriously, or not taking anti-Zionism seriously. I’m just saying I think that they haven’t sufficiently focused on the core of the problem.” Other Jewish organizations that Heritage said are part of its coalition include Combat Antisemitism Movement and the conservative Coalition for Jewish Values.

It is the non-Jewish groups who are better equipped to fight antisemitism, Carafano argued — and that if Jewish organizations were effective, then the U.S. would not have witnessed this recent rise in antisemitism.

“More of my concern was really with the non-Jewish groups who actually, I think, really bring a lot more to the table in terms of combating antisemitism and anti-Zionism,” Carafano said. “We really understood the Jewish perspective, but it was important for me to have all these organizations

represented, and quite honestly, if they were doing their job and they were being effective, we wouldn't have the problem that we have.”

The main goal of Project Esther is to undermine people who sympathize with Hamas and Hezbollah in the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks and the ongoing war in the Middle East. They liken their goal to successful American efforts to undermine the Ku Klux Klan or Al-Qaida after 9/11, now making those organizations synonymous with “bad.”

“This is precisely the effect Project Esther strives to generate when Americans hear ‘Hamas Supporters’ or ‘Hamas Support Network,’” the report says.

How it hopes to do that: purging Hamas propaganda from curricula, having Hamas-aligned faculty fired from U.S. universities, “social media no longer allow[ing] the spread of antisemitic content,” people “unwilling to join demonstrations” and more. What is not clear are the actions needed to meet any of these objectives.

“There are people in the conservative movement who want to fight antisemitism,” a leader of one antisemitism-focused organization said of the Heritage report. “But they clearly haven't figured out how to do it.”