

The Digital Battlefield: How Terrorists Use the Internet and Online Networks for Recruitment and Radicalization

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My name is Daniel Flesch. I am the Senior Policy Analyst for the Middle East and North Africa at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

The role of the digital space in how terrorists recruit and radicalize adherents is an important and particularly timely one because we are seeing it play out in real time across this country.

At The Heritage Foundation, I focus on US policy towards Israel and the region. I also manage Heritage's National Task Force to Combat Antisemitism (NTFCA), which is a coalition of organizations committed to combating the current wave of antisemitism in the United States, which is a particular anti-American form of antisemitism.

These two policy orientations enable me to see commonalities between how the terrorist organizations fighting Israel are also recruiting and radicalizing Americans. Put another way, I see the direct connection between the war Israel is fighting for survival in the Middle East and the one America, whether we are aware of it or not, is fighting at home.

This is the genesis behind the establishment of the NTFCA and the drafting of Project Esther: a National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism¹. Project Esther recognizes that today's form of antisemitism that has exploded across the country in the wake of the October 7th attack on Israel by the virulently anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and anti-American "pro-Palestinian movement" is part of a

¹ [Project Esther: A National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism | The Heritage Foundation](#)

global Hamas Support Network (HSN) that is trying to compel the U.S. government to abandon its long-standing support for Israel. Supported by activists and funders dedicated to the destruction of capitalism and democracy, the HSN benefits from the support and training of America's overseas enemies and, within the United States, receives the support of a vast network of activists and funders. This network has a much more ambitious, insidious goal—the destruction of capitalism and democracy. As their ends align, the HSN and its nihilist supporters indoctrinate the gullible into supporting Hamas and hating Israel to create the street mayhem that serves their ends.

In this ecosystem, Hamas and other terrorist organizations and countries are able to recruit and radicalize a willing population online with a level of ease and openness that cannot be understated.

It is easy because there are a plethora of social media and digital communication tools – including Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Signal and others – that organizations and individuals can use to engage with each other.

It is open because many of these organizations do not hide who they are and communicate publicly about their purpose, activities and intent. Though organizations often use multiple messaging platforms that feature various levels of security, much of their material is intended for public consumption. They are intentional about broadcasting their presence to attract adherents or sympathizers.

The current and immediate threat of malign actors – both foreign and domestic – recruiting and radicalizing within the United States must be understood in our post-October 7th environment.

The October 7th invasion and massacre of southern Israel – in which Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Palestinian civilians massacred over 1200 people and abducted over 250 others back into Gaza, including Americans – catalyzed, or revealed, a unique radicalization that has occurred in America, and across the West more broadly.

In many ways, October 7th was the spark that caused the tinder to burst into a giant, all-consuming flame.

Within hours of the massacre unfolding in Israel, many across this country took to the streets in support of Hamas, which the U.S. State Department designates as a terrorist organization and had just perpetrated the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust.

Under the guise of protesting our ally's legitimate response to its people being butchered, mutilated, raped and kidnapped, we saw Americans waving Palestinian and Hamas flags and shouting slogans such as “we don't want two states, we want 1948” and “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

These and other evocations demonstrate that rather than seek accommodation and a just solution to the war, these protestors view themselves as active participants and are advocating for the destruction of Israel, the world's only Jewish state and a U.S. ally.

And their calls for violence have only increased, including calling to “globalize the intifada” and threatening “there is only one solution: intifada, revolution”.

In calling for an “intifada”, the protestors refer to two periods of sustained violent Palestinian revolt against Israel. The first intifada (1987-93) ended with the onset of the Oslo peace process, as Israelis believed Palestinian violence stemmed from their desire for independence. The second intifada (2000-05) began with the failure of Oslo as Israelis learned that rather than seek their own state, the Palestinians sought to destroy the Jewish state. And they would seek to achieve this through any means necessary, including targeting civilians.²

Prior to Oct. 7, the second intifada was the most traumatic period in Israeli history. In its first full year, Palestinian suicide bombers targeted buses, pizza shops, nightclubs, and other “soft” targets, killing over 100 civilians, including Americans. In a country where it is commonplace for children to take public transportation to school, parents could no longer trust their kids would return home alive. By the time it ended, over 1,000 Israelis and 2,700 Palestinians were dead, with thousands more injured.

This is what those calling to “globalize the intifada” mean to import to American streets. Their goal is not to affect U.S. policy towards Israel or the Middle East, but to destroy the United States through political revolution that features a Palestinian-inspired strategy of indiscriminate attacks against civilians, to include the murdering of children.

Those agitating for an intifada have used Hamas’ invasion and massacre as a pretext to engage in further violence against Jews, including blocking Jewish congregants from entering synagogues while shouting “long live intifada,” stabbing a Jewish man while shouting “free Palestine,” fatally hitting a Jewish counter-protestor in an altercation, and many other incidents.³

Nowhere has discrimination, threats and violence against Jews and Americans been more concentrated than on university campuses. According to the ADL, in the first two months of the Fall 2023 semester, 73% of Jewish students had witnessed or experienced antisemitism.⁴ In November of last year, a Congressional investigation into antisemitism on college campuses found that “our most prominent American universities refused to crack down on antisemitism”, including those “students who engaged in antisemitic behavior, encampments, and intimidating tactics such as campus checkpoints and tax-exempt organizations that enabled and funded violent campus protests.”⁵

While the past sixteen months have featured the greatest display of overt antisemitism, anti-Zionism and anti-Israel agitation this country has ever seen, it is all a means to disrupting, degrading and destroying the fabric of American society and Western civilization.

Many of those who engage in this antisemitic and criminal activity may best be described as “useful idiots” that are supporting the progressive *cause du jour*; in many cases, they cannot tell you from which river to which sea “Palestine will be free.”

² [Is Intifada Coming to America? | RealClearPolitics](#)

³ Ibid.

⁴ [The Alarming Surge of Antisemitism on College Campuses | No Tolerance for Antisemitism](#)

⁵

[edworkforce.house.gov/uploadedfiles/10.30.24_committee_on_education_and_the_workforce_republican_staff_report_-_antisemitism_on_college_campuses_exposed.pdf](#)

Yet more than the presence of these useful idiots who wave flags or wear the apparel or other paraphernalia of U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations, or march alongside or pitch a tent at an encampment of those who support the same, it is the pervasiveness of those who call for an “intifada” that demonstrates there is already a sizeable contingent of radicalized organizations and individuals in this country, which presents the most fertile ground for recruitment.

To engage this willing population, Hamas and other extremist factions within the Palestinian and broader Arab world use the graphic violence of the October 7th attack and ensuing war as a form of “martyrdom” to rally support. These groups portray individuals involved in such attacks as heroes, with the violence being framed as a noble act in the struggle against an occupying force. By emphasizing the idealized heroic nature of violence, this framing targets younger generations.

Graphic videos and images are shared across social media platforms like X, Facebook and Instagram, and spread on encrypted messaging apps like Telegram. Extremist groups and supporters post unverified and highly disturbing content that lack context or factual checks, ensuring that raw emotional reactions take precedence over thoughtful analysis, effectively turning these platforms and apps into a propaganda tool to fuel anger and hate.

These messages and images are then rebroadcast and disseminated by organizations in America, such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Within Our Lifetime (WOL), Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP), and others.

These groups invite their account followers to trainings and to join more private communication channels, such as Signal, where they may conduct their actual planning and coordination.

Telegram is also used by Hamas-linked and other extreme channels to cross-pollinate ideas from different groups, including those agitating against Israel, against Jews, against colonialism, against imperialism, against the United States, against the West, etc.

Throughout all this, efforts are made to remain evasive. Account owners and members often change their names. They use coded language to demonstrate alignment across organizations. The intent is not to hide but to maintain a veneer of plausible deniability.

This is the ease and openness with which terrorist groups and US-based organizations that advocate for an “intifada” on American streets coordinate, plan and execute their activities.

And they are not alone in this regard. In July of last year, the Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines released a statement noting that “Iranian government actors have sought to opportunistically take advantage of ongoing protests regarding the war in Gaza.” The statement continued to note that the intelligence community has “observed actors tied to Iran’s government posing as activists online, seeking to encourage protests, and even providing financial support to protestors.”⁶

Hamas has also used public communication channels to disseminate talking points in the United States and radicalize susceptible Americans. In August 2024, the Palestine Chronicle, a news outlet

⁶ [Statement from Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines on Recent Iranian Influence Efforts](#)

run by the People Media Project, a US-based, tax exempt nonprofit, published an article⁷ about Khaled Meshaal, a Hamas leader, urging university students to protest.

According to a lawsuit filed on February 21, 2025, one of the writers for the Palestine Chronicle was Abdallah Aljamal⁸, who held three Israelis – Almog Meir Jan, Andrey Kozlov and Shlomi Ziv – hostage after their abduction from the Nova music festival on October 7th, 2023. Aljamal, the lawsuit alleges, is a member of Hamas.

The combined effect of this evasive and public digital communication is to radicalize adherents to engage in violent, criminal activity.

In November, local police and the FBI raided the home of two Palestinian-American sisters at George Mason University (GMU) in Virginia and found rifles, ammunition, and an explosive device, along with signs that read “Death to the Jews” and “Death to America” and the flags of Hamas and Hezbollah, both U.S.-designated terror organizations. The sisters are leaders in their campus’s SJP chapter and previously participated in an act of vandalism when they defaced the student center with threats of a “student intifada.”

In December, the FBI arrested an Egyptian national and GMU student for plotting an attack on the Israeli consulate in New York City because the “building represented the ‘Yahud,’” Arabic for “Jew.” Abdullah Ezzeldin Taha Mohamed Hassan had used X to communicate with the FBI.⁹

On New Years day, hours after an ISIS-inspired terrorist killed 15 civilians in a deadly car attack in New Orleans, pro-Palestinian protesters marched in Times Square in New York City chanting for an intifada.

Particularly on college campuses, many foreign students are engaging in this antisemitic and anti-American rhetoric and activity, including demonstrating for U.S.-designated terror organizations, in violation of their foreign student visa.

In recent news, a Georgetown graduate student was discovered to have direct ties to Hamas. A Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA) report found that Mapheze Saleh had previously worked for “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Gaza” – which is Hamas – and her father is Ahmed Yousef, “senior adviser to the Hamas Foreign Ministry.”¹⁰ According to CAMERA, Saleh’s “social media profiles have glorified Hamas and its acts of terror” and referred to America as “the plague.”

The revelation of Saleh’s ties came amid a probe into an event the Georgetown Law SJP planned for Ribhi Karajah, who spent 3.5 years in prison for his involvement in the U.S.-designated terror group Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine’s August 2019 roadside bombing that killed a young

⁷ [‘Stop this Criminal Aggression’ - Meshaal Urges Students to Resume Campus Protests - Palestine Chronicle](#)

⁸ [Gaza captor told hostages that Hamas collaborates with US campus protesters, lawsuit alleges | The Times of Israel](#)

⁹ [Concerns Raised About Anti-Israel Sentiment at University](#)

¹⁰ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/society-culture-and-history/human-rights/university-whose-students-invited-terrorist-to-campus-also-enrolled-former-hamas-official/ar-AA1z05St>

Israeli woman, Rina Schnerb. Karajah has also promoted PFLP material on his social media accounts.¹¹

In response to the presence of and widespread support for U.S.-designated terror organizations on campus from foreign students, the Trump Administration’s executive order to remove those students who provide material support to terror organizations and thereby pose a specific threat of violence is a welcome step to protect Jewish and non-Jewish students on campus. The threat is not to the free speech rights of a few on campus but to the safety, protection and well-being of all students.

More broadly, efforts should be taken to detect, deter and defeat the terror organizations’ networks, including their organizational supporters and footsoldiers, in America. Those organizations that support calls for an “intifada”, provide material support for or receive benefits from U.S.-designated terror groups should be designated as hate groups or domestic terrorists and have their tax-exempt status revoked.

In addition, local, state and federal law enforcement should share credible and actionable intelligence, including declassifying if and when appropriate, of intent to commit criminal acts.

Terror organizations have found the soft underbelly of American society and will radicalize and recruit an impressionable population for their nefarious means. The ability to counter their efforts exists, it just requires marshalling the requisite capabilities and attention to stem the tide of antisemitism and save America.

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¹¹ [Georgetown pressured to cancel event with convicted member of PFLP terror group | Fox News](#)

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