

How Trump plans to silence dissent

Clara Jeffery : 7-9 minutes

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Donald Trump has made it clear that there are groups he'd like to punish.

Much attention has been paid to the president-elect's planned crusades for his next term against [immigrants](#) and [transgender people](#). But less discussed has been another group on the list: protesters. Building off the bipartisan crackdown on anti-war student dissent last year, Trump has [made clear](#) he hopes to discipline, and potentially prosecute, civil disobedience with increased force.

In May, he [promised](#) a group of donors that "any student that protests, I [will] throw them out of the country." Trump hoped this would serve as a warning. "You know, there are a lot of foreign students," he continued. "As soon as they hear that, they're going to behave."

This is more than just bluster. *Reuters* [reported](#) that sources said Trump hopes to follow through on the promise on day one of his administration, by signing an executive order prioritizing deporting "international students who support Palestinian militant group Hamas and have violated the terms of their student visas."

In Trump's first term, "his instincts were to bring as much federal power as he could to bear on essentially peaceful protests," Jamie Kalven, founder of Chicago's [Invisible Institute](#) and a journalist who has studied First Amendment law for decades, told me. This time, there will be fewer guardrails. "It was complicated enough before Trump was elected. Now you're going to have various demagogues in Congress and the Trump administration actually bearing down in various ways on universities and on university students, seeing it as the bastion of the enemy within."

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Many of the plans for targeting protesters are taken from tactics employed by Democrats in recent years. For years, Palestinian-rights activists in the US—and Palestinians in the US, whether activists or not—have often been smeared as terrorists and threatened with deportation and imprisonment. In 2023, a wave of protest was met with a crackdown. The Department of Education pressured schools to stop pro-Palestine student organizing, as *Mother Jones* reported in September. [Dozens of universities](#) across the nation instituted strict new disciplinary codes prohibiting many forms of public assembly. [Over 3,600 protesters](#) were arrested.

Just months ago, Cornell University threatened PhD student Momodou Taal with revocation of his F-1 student visa—and, effectively, deportation—after Taal spent much of the previous year attending various pro-Palestine actions. On September 18, Taal and fellow students disrupted a career fair Cornell held that featured weapons manufacturer L3Harris. The university alleged that Taal had shoved police on his way in, a charge he denies.

After public pushback, Cornell backed down on deportation. But Taal has still been banned from campus and is no longer permitted to teach his classes. When we spoke the week of the election, he told me that he was still negotiating the opportunity to use library resources to write his thesis. ("I don't want to budge on library access," he said.)

"Given how it's been under [President Joe] Biden, it unfortunately normalizes what Trump is then allowed to do," he said. "I think, if the position taken by the [Biden] administration was that these kids should be protected, there would be more of an outcry if Trump then did a clampdown. I think what Biden has allowed for is that the clampdown is made easier for Trump now because the groundwork has already been laid."

One piece of potential infrastructure is the [Stop Terror-Financing and Tax Penalties on American Hostages Act](#)—a House bill designed to strip tax-exempt status from any nonprofit the Treasury Department designates a "terrorist-supporting organization." A version of the [bill](#) was introduced last year with broad bipartisan support. But earlier this week, it was [voted down](#) on the House floor, as a majority of Democrats were concerned that the bill would hand undue power to Trump to silence his political enemies. 144 Democrats and one Republican, Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky, voted against the fast-tracked bill. Nearly all Republicans—and dozens of Democrats—still supported it.

"All of us support stopping terrorism," Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas) told *The Intercept*. "[But] if he is on a march to make America fascist, we do not need to supply Donald Trump with any additional weapons to accomplish his ill purpose." Doggett had initially supported the bill but changed course after Trump's election.

The "nonprofit killer" bill, as critics have dubbed it, is not dead. It will go back for a vote next week. This time, with a simple majority, the bill will likely pass.

"I think we should anticipate something akin to the McCarthy era in terms of government being turned against certain categories of citizens," Kalven said of this legislative trend.

The Heritage Foundation, the right-wing group behind Project 2025, has also given Trump a workable plan to stop pro-Palestine dissent. It is called Project Esther. Nominally a policy proposal to tackle antisemitism on the left, it reads instead as a blueprint for taking down pro-Palestine activists. It suggests deporting "foreign Hamas Support Organization members," classifying anti-war nonprofits—like American Muslims for Palestine, Students for Justice in Palestine, and Jewish Voice for Peace—as members of a shadowy "Hamas Support Organization" network that is "attempting to lay siege to our education system, political processes, and government."

Attorney Zoha Khalili at Palestine Legal, an organization that has spent the past decade providing legal advice and support to Palestinian-rights activists, said Trump's election gives universities a chance to change their role.

"[Now] it's one of those situations where, you know, universities who have been repressing student activism might also now find themselves in this position where they have to care a bit more about their students," Khalili said. "Because of the values that they claim to uphold—wanting diversity, not wanting to have their students deported for political purposes."

What worries Khalili most, though, is not so much Trump's crackdown on protesters in the United States, but how his presidency will harm the people in Gaza on whose behalf Americans protest in the first place.

"The broader question that is on my mind is: How is the Trump administration going to impact Palestinians on the ground?" she asked. Trump's plans for the region are unclear—though he has expressed a desire for the war to end, he's also said he wants to [ban refugee resettlement from the Gaza Strip](#) and looks to be [stocking his administration with war hawks](#), including an evangelical end-times Zionist ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, who has [declared](#) that "there's really no such thing as a Palestinian."

"How aggressively Israel is engaging in genocide also impacts the climate here for activists, who are increasingly desperate to try to save people's lives," Khalili said. "So the stakes are quite high at the moment."