

What Is Antifa, the Movement Trump Wants to Declare a Terror Group?

President Trump's announcement brought renewed attention to the anti-fascist protesters he has blamed for inciting violence at protests.

By Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Sandra E. Garcia

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Seeking to assign blame for the protests that have convulsed cities across the country this week, President Trump said on Sunday that the United States would designate antifa, the loosely affiliated group of far-left anti-fascism activists, a terrorist organization.

The president's critics noted, however, that the United States does not have a domestic terrorism law and that antifa, a contraction of the phrase "anti-fascist," is not an organization with a leader, a defined structure or membership roles.

Rather, antifa is more of a movement of activists whose followers share a philosophy and tactics. They have made their presence known at protests around the country in recent years, including the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017.

Who are the members of antifa?

It is impossible to know how many people count themselves as members. Its followers acknowledge that the movement is secretive, has no official leaders and is organized into autonomous local cells. It is also only one in a constellation of activist movements that have come together in the past few years to oppose the far right.

Antifa members campaign against actions they view as authoritarian, homophobic, racist or xenophobic. Although antifa is not affiliated with other movements on the left — and is sometimes viewed as a distraction by other organizers — its members sometimes work with other local activist networks that are rallying around the same issues, such as the Occupy movement or Black Lives Matter.

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What are its goals?

Supporters generally seek to stop what they see as fascist, racist and far-right groups from having a platform to promote their views, arguing that public demonstration of those ideas leads to the targeting of marginalized people, including racial minorities, women and members of the L.G.B.T.Q. community.

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“The argument is that militant anti-fascism is inherently self-defense because of the historically documented violence that fascists pose, especially to marginalized people,” said Mark Bray, a history lecturer at Rutgers University and the author of “Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook.”

Many antifa organizers also participate in more peaceful forms of community organizing, but they believe that using violence is justified because of their views that if racist or fascist groups are allowed to organize freely, “it will inevitably result in violence against marginalized communities,” said Mr. Bray, whose defense of the anti-fascist movement incited criticism and generated support at Dartmouth College when he was a lecturer there.

When did the movement begin?

Although the Merriam-Webster dictionary says the word “antifa” was first used in 1946 and was borrowed from a German phrase signaling an opposition to Nazism, more people began joining the movement in the United States after the 2016 election of Mr. Trump, to counter the threat they believed was posed by the so-called alt-right, Mr. Bray said.

One of the first groups in the United States to use the name was Rose City Antifa, which says it was founded in 2007 in Portland, Ore. It has a large following on social media, where it shares news articles and sometimes seeks to dox, or reveal the identities and personal information of, figures on the right.

The antifa movement gained more visibility in 2017 after a series of events that put a spotlight on anti-fascist protesters, including the punching of a prominent alt-right member; the cancellation of an event by a right-wing writer at the University of California, Berkeley; and their confrontation of white nationalist protesters in Charlottesville who turned violent.

What distinguishes antifa from other protest groups?

Mr. Bray said antifa groups often use tactics similar to anarchist groups, such as dressing in all black and wearing masks. The groups also have overlapping ideologies, as both often criticize capitalism and seek to dismantle structures of authority, including police forces.

How have politicians and others reacted?

The movement has been widely criticized among the mainstream left and right. After the protests in Berkeley, Calif., in August 2017, Speaker Nancy Pelosi decried “the violent actions of people calling themselves antifa” and said they should be arrested.

Conservative publications and politicians routinely rail against supporters of antifa, who they say are seeking to shut down peaceful expression of conservative views. These critics point to moments during which purported antifa members have been accused of sucker-punching Trump supporters.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a professor of history at New York University who studies fascism, said she was worried that antifa’s methods could feed into what she said were false equivalencies that seek to lump violence on the left with attacks by the right, such as the killing of a protester in Charlottesville by a man who had expressed white supremacist views.

“Throwing a milkshake is not equivalent to killing someone, but because the people in power are allied with the right, any provocation, any dissent against right-wing violence, backfires,” Professor Ben-Ghiat said in an interview last year.

Between 2010 and 2016, 53 percent of terrorist attacks in the United States were carried out by religious extremists — 35 percent by right-wing extremists and 12 percent by left-wing or environmentalist extremists, according to a University of Maryland-led consortium that studies terrorism.

Militancy on the left can “become a justification for those in power and allies on the right to crack down,” Professor Ben-Ghiat said. “In these situations, the left, or antifa, are historically placed in impossible situations.”