

The ADL's dangerous own goal: Branding 'America First' as hate - opinion

The ADL's implication that America First is anti-Jewish or anti-Israel makes it more difficult for those making the case for a pro-Israel America First policy.



THEN-US PRESIDENT-ELECT Donald Trump speaks at an America First Policy Institute gala in Palm Beach, Florida, last year. ADL's branding of 'America First' as anti-Jewish makes it harder to build pro-Israel support inside the nationalist Right, says the writer.

(photo credit: Carlos Barria/Reuters)

By PESACH WOLICKI

AUGUST 21, 2025 04:44

Recently, the [Anti-Defamation League](#) added "America First" to its "Glossary

of Extremism and Hate," its online database of terms, personalities, and organizations that it deems problematic.

This wrongheaded move signals one of two possibilities about this once-great organization: Either it is out of touch with the political climate and discourse in the America First movement, or it is deliberately trying to falsely brand it anti-Jewish. Either way, it's a strategic blunder that only makes it harder for those of us working to build durable, pro-Israel support inside the populist nationalist Right.

Characterizing patriotic conservatives as bigots for embracing America First messaging undermines the very goals such criticism aims to achieve. Turning Point USA (TPUSA) recently hosted and published a focus group on Israel with a group of student leaders from the America First movement.

Along with some usual misunderstandings about Israel – these are students, after all – a number of participants expressed frustration over being labeled as antisemites when expressing opposition to foreign aid. As one student put it, "If you're going to say I hate Jews over and over and over again... if I'm going to be convicted of the crime, I might as well do the crime."

Most of these students affirmed their support for Israel's right to fight Hamas to victory, rejected Jew-hate, and still insisted that a heavily indebted, inflation-weary America must put its own house in order before sending resources abroad. Regardless of the relative merit of this position, calling it antisemitism doesn't educate; it hardens resentment and pushes persuadable people away. If being [America First](#) is antisemitism, then "antisemitism" has lost its meaning.

A pro-Israel America First policy

The ADL's implication that America First is [anti-Jewish](#) or anti-Israel also makes it more difficult for those making the case for a pro-Israel America First policy. Consider the heated debate in America First media surrounding President Donald Trump's June strikes that crippled key Iranian nuclear assets.

Conservative pundit and staunch defender of Israel Josh Hammer argued that far from contradicting "America First," those strikes embodied it. The strike on Iran did not involve utopian nation-building or open-ended deployments – just decisive action to deter the world's leading state sponsor of terror from crossing the nuclear threshold. He argued that this outcome advanced core American interests while simultaneously bolstering Israel's security.

This is the logic of the Trump-era doctrine that key thinkers in the movement like Michael Anton have articulated for years. America First is neither isolationism nor missionary democracy-promotion. It is "principled realism": align with allies when interests converge, use overwhelming but limited force when vital interests are at stake, and avoid the hubris of social-engineering other nations.

Not only does this lens make sense to a generation priced out of housing and exhausted and scarred by forever wars, it also provides a coherent case for Israel: a strategically valuable ally whose security advances American security against the jihadist threat to Western civilization.

Whatever one thinks of these particular policy ideas, the point remains. The America First movement of today is focused on problems at home because

the American economic system is not working for too many regular Americans. In this political climate, the case for support of Israel or US involvement in the Middle East must be made in terms that clearly show how the policy in question benefits American citizens at home.

When the ADL suggests that "America First" is antisemitic because of how the slogan was used during the World War II era and because it implies "anti-immigrant and anti-globalism beliefs" – the reasons given on the league's website – it pushes millions of normal patriotic conservatives away from Israel. More critically, the ADL is gifting the genuine antisemites on the Right a valuable recruiting tool: "See? They think your patriotism is hate." That's not vigilance by the ADL; that's an own goal.

Prioritizing American interests isn't antisemitic

This brings us to the practical cost the [ADL seems unwilling](#) to acknowledge. If you want conservatives to support Israel's security amid domestic crises, you need credible messengers to make the case inside the MAGA movement. Charlie Kirk, for example, has spent years arguing to Gen-Z conservatives that Israel is a strategic asset and a civilizational ally, often at real political cost.

Smearing his audience and his organization, Turning Point USA – listed in the aforementioned "glossary" – as being antisemitic for prioritizing American interests only sabotages that effort. You can't convince people that supporting Israel serves the United States if you start by branding their patriotism as hate.

Frankly, it's hard to take a "Glossary of Extremism" seriously when it flags a mainstream campus group like TPUSA while omitting organizations with

clear anti-Israel and anti-Jewish records. For example, CAIR was named by federal prosecutors as an unindicted co-conspirator in the Holy Land Foundation Hamas-financing case, and the Muslim Brotherhood is the ideological mothership for Islamist movements hostile to Israel, including Hamas.

Then there are anti-Israel activist groups like Palestine Feminist Collective and Code Pink, the Marxist organization that has openly funded many of the most virulently antisemitic pro-Hamas, anti-Israel demonstrations since October 7. None of these groups appear in the ADL's glossary.

There was a time when the ADL actually fought antisemitism. Tragically, that time has long passed. Labeling "America First" as antisemitic is only the latest example of how far the organization has strayed from its mission. Telling debt-burdened, patriotic conservatives that prioritizing their country is bigotry while ignoring the true enemies of Israel does not fight Jew-hatred: It promotes it.

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