

Israeli government defends Trump in aftermath of Pittsburgh massacre

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Israel's government has sought to capitalize on the murder of 11 Jews in Pittsburgh as another opportunity to conflate anti-Semitism as anti-Israel. It has defended US President Donald Trump against accusations that his poisonous anti-Muslim and xenophobic rants helped lay the basis for the massacre in Pittsburgh.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared, "When Jews are murdered in Pittsburgh, the people of Israel feel the pain," and thanked Trump for "unequivocally condemning this heinous crime and for pledging to fight those who seek to destroy the Jewish people."

The gunman Robert Bowers' message on social media, posted shortly before walking into the Tree of Life synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, and shooting worshippers at Saturday morning services, in fact made clear he had targeted that synagogue because it participates in HIAS, an organization that helps settle refugees from Syria and Central America in the Pittsburgh area—the very same people that were Trump's first targets when he became president last year.

Bowers regularly posted on the far-right social media platform Gab, where he accused Jewish people of trying to bring "evil" Muslims into the US. His final post read, "I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in."

His language, including the use of "invaders" to refer to migrants fleeing poverty and violence in Central America caused by US imperialism, was taken straight from the Trump administration's lexicon. Trump called the caravan of migrants heading for the US border "an assault on our country." It was, he said, an invasion that threatened to destroy "your neighbourhoods, your hospitals, your schools." He used anti-Semitic and fascist tropes to denounce those who "want to turn the clock back and restore power to corrupt, power-hungry globalists ..."

Trump notoriously called neo-Nazis protestors "fine

people" in the wake of the murder of Heather Heyer, the anti-fascist protester, by a white supremacist during the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, August 2017.

Many American Jews have concluded correctly that Trump was politically responsible for inciting the Pittsburgh gunman's murderous actions, as well as the wave of mail bombs sent last week by Trump supporter Cesar Sayoc to prominent Democrats and Trump critics, with more than 35,000 signing a letter by members of Pittsburgh's Jewish community telling Trump he was not welcome there until he denounced white nationalism.

The massacre also evoked a powerful response from America's Muslim community with an Iranian immigrant raising \$650,000 from nearly 12,000 people in two days and two Muslim-American organizations raising more than \$150,000 to cover the costs of the funerals of those killed.

Such spontaneous outpourings of solidarity across Jewish and Muslim communities are anathema to Netanyahu's Likud-led coalition government and the fascist parties on which it rests.

Netanyahu's dispatch of Education and Diaspora Minister Naftali Bennett to Pittsburgh to attend the commemoration event for the murdered Jews was an insult to the memory of those who were slain. The leader of the far-right Jewish Home Party, which represents the extremist settler movement, has been at the forefront of the attacks on NGOs such as the New Israel Fund that help refugees, claiming that it is contributing to the rise in crime in Tel Aviv.

His call for Jewish voters to vote for Jewish Home in the recent municipal elections sought to whip up anti-Arab sentiment, warning of a "takeover" by "the sector"—a reference to Israel's Palestinian citizens. Bennett said, "Only the party of the Jewish Home can protect Jewish Ramleh"—a mixed Palestinian-Jewish city

near Tel Aviv—and posted a picture of a young woman dressed in a hijab with the headline, “TOMORROW THIS COULD BE YOUR DAUGHTER.”

Speaking at the commemoration event, Bennett sought to draw a parallel between Palestinians firing rockets from Gaza and the fascist murders in Pittsburgh. “From Sderot [an Israeli town close to Gaza] to Pittsburgh, the hand that fires missiles is the same hand that shoots worshippers,” he said.

Bennett specifically rejected any link between the synagogue killings and Trump’s fascistic rants, denouncing anyone using “this horrific anti-Semitic act to attack President Trump” as “unfair and wrong” and calling Trump “a true friend of the State of Israel and to the Jewish people. With President Trump we never have to worry if he has our backs... He is fighting terror worldwide including Israel’s greatest enemy, the murderous regime of Tehran. He recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and kept his promise to move the embassy there.”

Some 100 Jewish activists held a protest against Bennett, led by IfNotNow, a group that opposes Israel’s illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories. Moriah Ella Mason told the rally that Bennett’s policies “are the same types of policies and rhetoric espoused by Trump, and the same types of policies and rhetoric that have unleashed violence against my community.”

Ron Dermer, Israel’s ambassador to the US, took up Bennett’s theme, declaring, “I see a lot of people who attack Jews on both sides,” left and right, thereby equating violent white supremacists who chant “Jews will not replace us” with left-wing students—including Jewish students—who demand justice for the Palestinians.

Netanyahu’s own Likud party reportedly described HIAS as “a left-wing Jewish group that promotes immigration to the US and works against Trump.” His coalition government recently oversaw the passage of the “Nation-State Law” enshrining Jewish supremacy.

Netanyahu’s government has demonized George Soros, the Hungarian-born Jewish financier who is a frequent target of anti-Semitic attacks in the US and Europe, for supporting pro-democracy and human rights groups that oppose its policies. Netanyahu’s son Yair even posted a meme attacking Soros with anti-Semitic imagery that elicited praise from David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Netanyahu has repeatedly solidarized himself with far-right and fascistic forces in Europe, including Hungary and Poland, to the extent that last July, Yad Vashem,

Israel’s Holocaust museum, accused Netanyahu of whitewashing Holocaust history over an agreement he signed with Poland.

He was noticeably silent after reports emerged of some German Jews forming their own group within the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), because of their support for its incitement against Arabs and opposition to Muslim immigration.

Netanyahu recently hosted the Philippines’ President Rodrigo Duterte, who has praised and helped organize vigilante death squads, and Azerbaijan’s Ilham Aliyev, not to mention the coterie of far-right figures from the US who attended the opening ceremony of the US embassy in Jerusalem earlier this year.

He welcomed the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who has pledged to move the Brazilian Embassy to Jerusalem, to the presidency of Brazil and is expected to make a state visit to Israel. As far as Netanyahu and Israel’s political elite is concerned, the far-right is not a problem so long as it is not explicitly anti-Semitic, targets Muslims and backs Zionism and Israel.

The backing for Trump by Netanyahu is a quid pro quo for the US president’s support for Israel’s brutal attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These continued in recent days with an attack on the 32nd “Great March of Return” demonstration in the Gaza Strip, at which protesters demanded an end to Israel’s blockade and the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Israel troops again fired on the protesters, injuring 32. Since the protests began on March 30, according to Gaza’s health ministry, 218 Palestinians have been killed, and more than 23,000 others have been wounded.



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