

Making Prayer Safer: 94% of Homeland Security (DHS) Grants to Enhance Security Goes to Jewish Groups

Should government pay for extra security at houses of worship?

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There is an unfortunate tendency in the United States to throw money at a problem, particularly when the problem is related to powerful constituencies. The recent attacks on synagogues, churches, and mosques have included two attacks on synagogues in [Pittsburgh](#) and [San Diego](#) that killed 12 and a shooting at a Texas church in 2017 that killed 26. The recent [massacre of 51 Muslims in New Zealand](#) also resonated in the United States.

Attacks on religious sites are increasingly being seen as a national problem in the U.S., even though they are statistically speaking extremely rare, far less frequent than attacks on or inside public schools. The characteristic government [response to the incidents](#) has been to authorize and granting money to provide surveillance cameras, bulletproof glass and armed guards for those sites that are considered to be particularly vulnerable.

It also is happening at state and local levels. The New York city council is considering including funding for security at houses of worship in the next year's budget, while Connecticut is proposing a grant of \$5 million to pay for specific physical security upgrades. Not to be left behind, a bipartisan bill has been introduced in the Senate by Senators Rob Portman and Gary Peters to authorize \$75 million in grants to protect religious sites as well as select nonprofit organizations. The nonprofits would include facilities that are considered vulnerable to violence, including abortion clinics.

As usual, however, the devil is in the details and, most particularly, in the process used to determine who gets the cash. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) already doles out considerable money, [\\$1.7 billion in 2019](#), in grants to various organizations and both governmental and non-governmental entities. Included are grants to "nonprofit" groups that are considered to be particularly targeted by terrorists. This process is not particularly objective and [it was reported](#) in 2014 that fully 94% of all grants issued by DHS to enhance security had gone to Jewish groups and their associated facilities. Jewish groups also received nearly all of the grants since the inception of the program in 2005, totaling \$151 million. This disparity, which was the case even before the two recent armed attacks on synagogues, is a tribute to the political power of Jewish organizations versus the lack of the same relating to small and relatively impecunious congregations of Christians and Muslims.

Indeed, many religious groups have taken steps on their own, without a government handout, to [enhance their own security](#). They are to be commended for doing so. It is to be presumed that some other houses of worship have been hesitant about upgrading security,

even if they can afford it, because they are waiting for the government to cover the costs. Other religious entities have eschewed overt security because it sends the wrong message about their accessibility to the public.

In theory, community policing means that law enforcement officers, paid for by the entire community, will be deployed at locations where their presence contributes to public safety. This is already the case in most towns and cities, where policemen are present and highly visible at the times of religious services to handle traffic and other security problems. This is all accomplished without any particular fuss and without any special federal government grants.

There is also the question of how the grants would be awarded. As noted above, the politically powerful who have access to the bureaucrats will inevitably be the principal beneficiaries. Sarah Levin, director of governmental affairs for the Secular Coalition for America, [has observed](#) that there is no particular reason why grants for security enhancement at religious sites should not be made available to anyone who believes him or herself targeted for any particular reason or even for no reason at all. She cites the example of non-religious nonprofits, to include abortion clinics, explaining that “Favoring the security of houses of worship over the security of other communities is not only violation of separation of church and state, it’s wrong.”

Levin is right but she is wrong about the broader acceptability of government issuing grants to specific communities or constituencies that are considered to be threatened. Government should be neutral, leaving it up to local police and the resources of the communities themselves to assess the security situation and provide appropriate protection against potential criminals.

The desire on the part of some in government to pander to some constituencies that are most vocal is understandable, but it is not acceptable to do so because that ultimately means that the state is enabling the activities of one group over another based on a subjective grant-giving process. And doing so also raises moral issues. Why should I as a Roman Catholic who does not believe acceptable some forms of abortion be required to pay taxes to protect the activity of abortion clinics?

The mentality of those in government that compels some legislators to seek to favor certain groups derives from the unfortunate tendency to regard some actions as more heinous than others. Is it really worse to shoot people in a synagogue rather than in an elementary school, requiring national level remedial action consisting of grants to upgrade security in the former rather than the latter?

The willingness of some in government to use taxpayer money to support constituencies near to their hearts rather than based on objective standards that apply to everyone all began with the popularization of the concept of the “hate crime.” For the first time killing, robbing or maiming someone was considered somehow to be worse if hatred for that individual or the group he or she represented was involved. Now we Americans will have religious groups and abortion clinics alike lining up for assistance to protect themselves against maniacs and the ones who shout the loudest will, as ever, get the lion’s share of the money.

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*Featured image: Bipartisan Plan to Secure State Bonding for Synagogue, Mosque, and Church Security.
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