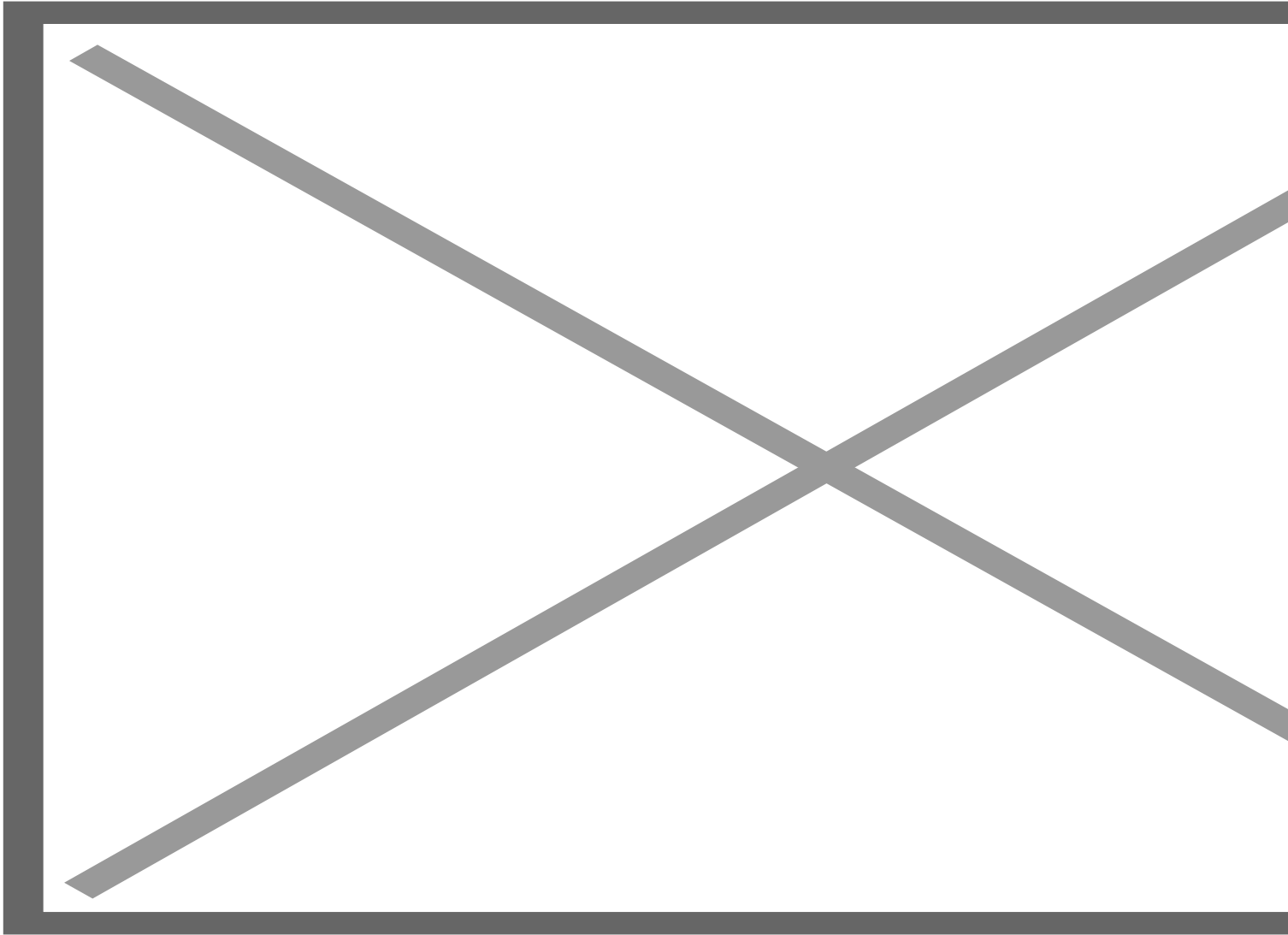


New bipartisan bill would create protest-free buffer zones around houses of worship

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Recent protests near Park East Synagogue in New York City (Video screengrab)

A bipartisan bill to prevent demonstrations near houses of worship was introduced in both the House of Representatives and Senate August 6 and has already won the support of several Jewish organizations.

The Right to Worship Act would establish a 100-foot, protest-free buffer zone around houses of worship one hour before and one hour after religious services. Anyone violating the buffer zone could be subject to a civil fine beginning at \$2,500 and up to \$10,000 for additional violations.

The [bill](#) follows a less stringent buffer zone law recently passed in New York state after raucous protests erupted outside a Manhattan synagogue as it had rented space to an organization helping Jews move to Israel as well as to settlements in the occupied West Bank. During that November protest outside the Park East Synagogue, [there](#)

[were chants of “death to the IDF,” “globalize the intifada” and “We don’t want no Zionists here.”](#)

The new federal bill was introduced by Reps. Tom Suozzi (D-N.Y.) and Brad Knott (R-N.C.), along with Sens. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Elissa Slotkin (D-Mich.). It was enthusiastically greeted by the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Federations of North America and Agudath Israel of America, an Orthodox Jewish group.

One Muslim group—the Islamic Society of North America—and a few Hindu groups also endorsed the bill.

There were no Christian groups listed as supporters but the leader of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission supports laws protecting houses of worship from protestors.

“Exercising your right to worship should not require you to exhibit particular courage as you enter your synagogue, church, mosque, temple, mandir, or gurdwara,” Suozzi said in a press release, adding, “attendees of religious services should not be harassed, threatened, intimidated, or targeted for practicing their faith.”

Several states have fast-tracked bills to protect houses of worship, including Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Idaho.

Antisemitic attacks on synagogues have grown this past year, as have other hate crimes. In March, a man rammed a car into Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan. In January, a man set fire to Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, Mississippi. Synagogues have also been sites of protest, especially those demonstrating against Israel.

Civil rights groups, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, have consistently opposed buffer zones, arguing that they are, in effect, “no-speech zones” and violate First Amendment rights by severely restricting public assembly and free expression.

Jewish groups on the left have opposed similar bills.

“It certainly seems to be related to preventing Palestinian speech,” said Rebecca Alpert, a retired professor of religion at Temple University in Philadelphia and a member of the leadership team at Rabbis for Ceasefire.

Suozzi introduced a similar bill in April which has not progressed in the House. —Religion News Service