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DOJ Opens Door To Stripping Citizenship Over Politics

It's the latest example of the Trump administration's assault on citizenship.



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By Josh Kovensky | July 2, 2025 6:29 a.m.



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Throughout the campaign, Republicans teased an idea: the next Trump government would start to remove the citizenship of naturalized Americans.

Stephen Miller suggested it; the idea appeared in Project 2025. Online fever-swamp entrepreneurs, like Claremont Institute donor Charles Haywood, pushed a national “review” of everyone naturalized since 1965.

Now, the DOJ has taken the first real step towards expanding the government's efforts to strip citizenship from those who applied for it and received it — and has suggested it will be doing so for explicitly political reasons. It came in a June 11 memo dryly titled “Civil Division Enforcement Priorities,” written by Assistant Attorney General Brett Shumate.

Last on the list of five priorities is denaturalization. The memo directs the government to “maximally” go after denaturalization cases, and ranks which kinds of cases should receive the most attention. At the top of the list are cases against those who “pose a potential danger to national security, including those with a nexus to terrorism.”

Recently, denaturalization cases have dealt with a narrow set of circumstances. Perhaps someone lied on their citizen application, or failed to disclose something significant enough that, had it been disclosed, the government would have declined to grant the person citizenship. The DOJ finds out, and files a civil lawsuit in federal court to revoke the person's citizenship. In many cases, this has been applied to war criminals and people who otherwise concealed crimes that they were in the process of committing as they applied for citizenship.

But the June DOJ memo's language around terrorism and national security threats is incredibly broad. In the world of the memo, “pos[ing] a potential danger to national security” is enough to merit a review of your citizenship application. It raises concerns that the DOJ will seek to use claims that a person poses such a danger to accuse naturalized Americans of omitting key information on their citizenship applications, which ask about ties to groups that commit terrorism or advocate for the overthrow of the U.S. government. In the Alien Enemies Act removals, the Trump administration twisted the definition of “invasion” to summarily deport people it cast as invaders to CECOT; Tufts student Rûmeysa Öztürk's pro-Palestine op-ed in a student newspaper was enough for the administration to accuse her of supporting Hamas and revoke her visa.

The question is whether the administration will apply this kind of nihilistic legal maneuvering to claim that a naturalized American who failed to disclose support for, say, a pro-Palestine group misled the government through the omission.

“The government’s aim is to push the envelope,” Cassandra Robertson, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University who has studied denaturalization, told TPM. “Just as we’ve seen in these other areas of immigration more broadly, they’re intending to bring that same spirit into denaturalization.”

There’s a chorus of people calling for this approach, a right-wing push that was invigorated with Zohran Mamdani’s come-from-behind victory in the New York City Democratic mayoral primary. Mamdani was born in Uganda and naturalized in 2018. Rep. Andy Ogles (R-KY) asked the DOJ last week to review denaturalizing Mamdani over a rap he performed that praised a non-profit whose leaders were convicted in 2008 on charges related to supporting Hamas. President Trump himself said on Tuesday that “a lot of people are saying [Mamdani] is here illegally.”

In a statement, the DOJ told TPM that “denaturalization proceedings will only be pursued as permitted by law and supported by evidence against individuals who illegally procured or misrepresented facts in the naturalization process.”

“Those who gain citizenship through unlawful means and endanger our national security will not maintain the benefits of being an American citizen,” the statement reads.

The issue comes down to how one defines “endanger our national security.” It’s vague, used in this case by an administration that’s spent the past five months exploiting the concept for political gain and internal repression.

Still, ramping up denaturalizations on that basis would be difficult. Purely political denaturalizations ended with a 1967 Supreme Court case, Robertson said. More recently, the Supreme Court held that the government could only denaturalize people for information that, had the government known about it, would have

resulted in the person's citizenship application being denied. It's far from clear whether rapping about a nonprofit found to have supported Hamas would come anywhere close to that standard.

Patrick Weil, a visiting professor at Yale Law School who wrote a book on the history of denaturalization in the United States, told TPM last year that though the Trump administration could try — and could use the threat of denaturalizations to terrorize people — it would be unlikely to succeed in carrying them out on a mass scale. The judiciary up to the Supreme Court has largely upheld the concept of citizenship for naturalized Americans in recent years, Weil said. Cutting corners by, say, dramatically expanding what it means to support Hamas would still be unlikely to achieve much beyond scaring and harassing people.

“It's a policy of fear that he's trying to do,” Weil said.

What the DOJ is describing would require an intensive review of the applications of naturalized Americans to find those who met one of ten criteria outlined in the memo as making them “priorities for denaturalization.”

Some of those ten criteria are more in line with past practice — people who are war criminals, people convicted of other felonies. But the breadth of the review envisioned in the memo combined with the breadth of who the administration may decide qualifies as a “danger to national security” places a large swath of citizens under scrutiny.

Robertson, the Case Western professor, said that the approach may cleave citizenship between those naturalized and those who were born with it.

“If you have one group of people who feels very comfortable that their citizenship is secure, they will feel much more comfortable being politically active,” she said. “And if you have another group of people who worries that if their political activity gets on the wrong side of somebody in power, that their lives and livelihoods might

be vulnerable — that is a lesser citizenship. That is a reason why people might step back from political participation.”



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