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USA

Lessons of abductions and terror

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The abduction of Mahmoud Khalil — the Palestinian graduate student and green card holder seized March 8 at his Columbia University residence — is now multiplied by other high-profile detentions and deportation threats, and dozens or even hundreds of unpublicized cases. Secretary of State Marco Rubio openly boasts as much.

These arrests and disappearances highlight a reign of terror confronting student visa and even green card holders. They pull together multiple interwoven aspects of the five-alarm civil and human rights emergency in the United States and the global U.S. empire:

- The U.S.-Israeli genocide in Palestine, which now openly threatens the forced depopulation of Gaza and the mass ethnic cleansing and Israel's pending annexation of the West Bank.
- The drive to criminalize protest actions against the genocide, especially on college campuses.
- The collusion of the pro-Israeli Zionist and Christian-nationalist far right including Campus Watch, Betar USA, and Canary Mission identifying student and faculty activists for government targeting, expulsion and/or deportation.
- The intention of the Trump administration to destroy U.S. universities as institutions of scientific, cultural and critical thought — and the spectacular cowardice of college administrations at Columbia, the University of Michigan and others in capitulating to these attacks.
- The lawless conduct of the Trump gang, including blatant evasion of court orders blocking deportations.
- The connections between the far-right campaigns in both the United States and Israel, aimed at consolidating authoritarian rule in both countries.

We'll discuss some specific cases. First, however, there's no denying the overall terrifying moment facing targeted groups in the United States, to say nothing of Palestine — or tens of millions of people globally facing mass epidemics or starvation from the peremptory cutoff of U.S. funding of critical survival programs.

At the same time, vital services provided by federal government agencies and their work forces are being shredded on a daily basis with pending disastrous consequences for public health, military veterans' care, public schools, the postal service, and soon Social Security and Medicare.

How to resist a multi-front assault that's clearly designed to have such a paralyzing effect? First, it's necessary to recognize the systemic and coordinated character of the attacks, so that the targets aren't compartmentalized and the defense efforts isolated and divided.

The Targets

Mahmoud Khalil, Dr. Rasha Alawieh and Prof. Badar Khan Suri are not separate cases from, say, the threatened cut

of \$175 million in federal grants to the University of Pennsylvania for the crime of a transgender athlete participating in women's sports, or a presidential decree annulling federal workers' union contracts and bargaining rights.

Those interconnections are part of what brought out an estimated several million people April 5 demanding "Hands Off" into the streets of hundreds of U.S. cities and towns — large and small, blue states, red states and purple states — furious at the crimes of the Trump-Musk gang, and aghast over the astonishing market free-fall precipitated by Trump's tariff rampage against the world economy.

The staying power of this popular resistance remains to be tested, but April 5 was one hell of a start.

To review some basic facts: Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia graduate with a green card and eight-months pregnant wife Noor Abdalla, was grabbed by Department of Homeland Security plainclothes agents as the couple returned to their university-owned residence.

Columbia had ignored Khalil's requests for protection as he'd sensed he was being followed. A prominent activist during last year's encampment and a negotiator for the peaceful resolution of the occupation, Khalil has never been charged with any crime or university disciplinary action.

Upon being told his "student visa" (nonexistent) and then his green card were "revoked," Mahmoud was taken to New Jersey and whisked to an isolated Louisiana detention facility before courts could intervene. A federal judge ordered the case to be moved back to New Jersey. These days, whether the Trump regime will obey this and other rulings remains to be seen.

Columbia student Yunseo Chung, 21, is a permanent resident who has lived in the United States since age 7. Now at an undisclosed location, she's suing to prevent being deported after ICE agents raided and searched Columbia residences on the pretext that the school or its residences are "harboring and concealing illegal aliens on its campus."

Neither "illegal" nor charged with anything, under what conceivable legal theory is Ms. Chung subject to deportation? Supposedly, participation in pro-Palestinian demonstrations makes her "a detriment to U.S. foreign policy objectives" under the terms of a 1952 McCarthy-era law authorizing deportation on those grounds.

Dr. Rasha Alawieh, a kidney specialist, surgeon and assistant professor at Brown University Medicine, returning from a trip to Lebanon, was detained for 36 hours and then put on a return flight — in violation of an emergency court order barring her deportation.

The ostensible "grounds for removal": Dr. Alawieh's attendance at the funeral of Hasan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader assassinated by Israel, where tens of thousands of Lebanese were present.

These are far from the only cases of Trump's agents evading a court order, as illustrated by the mass removal of alleged Venezuelan or Salvadoran "gang members" — absent proof or any shred of legal process — to the deadly "super-max" prison in El Salvador.

Despite admitting an "administrative error," the government says the courts have "no jurisdiction" to order the return of the wrongfully deported Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia, a father living with protected status in the United States, who was picked up March 12 in Baltimore after finishing his factory shift.

Ranjani Srinivasan, a student from India whose doctoral work in urban planning is almost completed, was “disenrolled” by Columbia after ICE agents arrived at her apartment and, failing to gain entry to detain her, said her visa was cancelled and informed her that she had 15 days to leave the country.

Now seeking asylum in Canada but not disclosing her location to protect her safety, she told CBC News that she had no actual involvement in campus protests (she was apparently spotted in a crowd last spring at a time when her campus residence had been blocked off).

Grant Miner, president of the Columbia graduate student union and a fifth-year doctoral student, was fired from his job the day before bargaining on union’s contract began and expelled for pro-Palestinian activity.

Columbia’s despicable behavior in suppressing and expelling students last year is now compounded with its cowardly kowtowing to a set of draconian demands from the Trump White House. These measures include enhanced campus police powers, and banning masks and placing its highly regarded Middle East, African and Asian Studies center under external “trusteeship.”

It is strongly suspected that members of the university Trustees board actually fingered Khalil to the government. As professor emeritus and renowned historian Rashid Khalidi wrote in *The Guardian* (March 25, 2025):

“After Friday’s capitulation, Columbia barely merits the name of a university, since its teaching and scholarship on the Middle East, and soon much else, will soon be vetted by a ‘senior vice provost for inclusive pedagogy,’ in reality a senior vice provost for Israeli propaganda.

“Partisans of Israel, infuriated that scholarship on Palestine had found a place at Columbia, once named it ‘Bir Zeit on the Hudson.’ But if it any longer merits the name of a university, it should be called Vichy on the Hudson.” [Bir Zeit is the leading Palestinian university on the West Bank. “Vichy” refers to the World War II French puppet regime under Nazi occupation —ed.]

Badar Khan Suri is a Georgetown professor and postdoctoral scholar on religion and peace processes in the Middle East and South Asia, legally in the United States on a research scholarship and professorial visa. An Indian national who lives with his U.S. citizen wife and three children in Rosslyn, Virginia, when he arrived home March 17 after a Ramadan iftar meal celebration, Suri was taken into custody by masked federal agents without being accused of any crime.

In just over 72 hours, he was transferred to multiple immigration detention centers and then to an ICE staging center in Alexandria, Louisiana. Prof. Suri’s colleagues suspect that the government’s real target is his Palestinian-American wife Mapheze Saleh, who’s a citizen and can’t be rounded up for deportation.

On March 25, masked DHS agents similarly grabbed Tufts student activist Rumeysa Ozturk from the sidewalk, pulling her into an unmarked car. Like Mahmoud Khalil, Rumeysa was transported to an ICE Louisiana detention center without the knowledge of her lawyers or family.

Using the excuse of “Jewish safety” and the need to combat allegedly widespread and persistent antisemitism (a bonkers exaggeration, if there ever was one) at Harvard, Columbia, etc., should also be seen as a version of a standard rightwing ploy.

It is perversely aimed at getting the targets of these illegal and undemocratic assaults to “blame the Jews.” This is

being done to deflect from the Right's own agenda (that of MAGA, Christian Zionists, etc.) to destroy the authority of the liberal academic institutions; to detract attention from genuine antisemitism on the Right and in the Trump administration itself; to prohibit truth-telling about what is happening in Gaza; to engage in a campaign of increasing white supremacist ideology in education and elsewhere; and more.

We must stand up to the capitulators in academe and elsewhere who give credence to this lie, and not allow this crass exploitation of Jewish identity to happen — for the sake of Palestinian lives and for everyone's future. A powerful example was set April 2 by Jewish Columbia students who chained themselves to the campus fence demanding freedom for their friend Mahmoud Khalil.

Crisis and Emergency Fightback

The present course — from rule by executive decree to terrorizing immigrant communities and pro-Palestinian activists to abolishing birthright citizenship — leads toward the substantive destruction of constitutional government in the United States, leaving some decorative wallpaper in place to disguise the rot.

Alongside the cowardice of many college administrations is that of some leading law firms capitulating to Trump. In contrast, civil liberties organizations and attorneys for targets of deportation are energetically intervening in court cases and sounding the alarm in media outlets. But from the top leadership of the Democratic Party comes deafening silence on the destruction of Palestine.

Senator Cory Booker's March 31-April 1 speechathon pointed to multiple Trump-Musk abuses, but found no time to reference the slaughter in Palestine. Nor did this new hero of the Democrats join the 15 Senators who voted for Bernie Sanders' resolution to disapprove the new massive shipment of U.S. weapons for Israel. And while dozens of Democratic members of Congress have issued a letter challenging Mahmoud Khalil's detention, minority leader Hakeem Jeffries' name is conspicuously absent.

To be sure, the repression we're witnessing is embedded in a much broader crisis. It includes the blatant white-supremacist assaults on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs; the erasure of Black history and struggle from the Smithsonian museums, the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, the Defense Department website and elsewhere.

There's also the potential for Trump's tariff mania to ignite a U.S., North American and world economic slump. Some of these issues are discussed in this issue of *Against the Current*, including Kim Moody's article on the economy and the Democrats' inability to effectively respond.

The fightback is up to the grassroots, and begins with the defense of all those in the crosshairs of Trump's repressive rampage. Of course, any supporter of basic First Amendment rights should be demanding Mahmoud Khalil's immediate release, whatever their views of activism for Palestine.

At the same time, the agitation and activism for Palestinian freedom and against the genocide will and must continue, inspired by Khalil's own example and courage.

We must insist that the fate of the Palestinian people as a mass human sacrifice on the altar of political cynicism, imperialism and settler colonialism is no isolated matter. It is inextricably tied to the struggles in our own society and the future of us all.

[Against the Current](#) 12 March 2025

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