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USA

The fight to free Mahmoud Khalil and defend freedom of speech

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In the past few days, thousands of people across the United States have demonstrated in support of Mahmoud Khalil, an individual who has come to symbolize President Donald Trump's attacks on immigrants, on Palestinians, on the Palestine solidarity movement, on universities, and on academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Trump has had Mahmoud Khalil—a Columbia University graduate student of Palestinian descent, born in Syria and of Algerian citizenship—arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and plans to deport him, the first in what the president says will be a number of such arrests of pro-Palestine activists whom he has accused of being “pro-Hamas,” supporters of terrorism, and antisemitic. The case is particularly shocking and threatening because Khalil, who was a leader of pro-Palestine demonstrations at Columbia, holds a Green Card granting him legal permanent U.S. residency and is married to an American citizen, Noor Abdalla, who is eight months pregnant.

No criminal charges have been filed against Khalil who has no criminal record. The government provided no evidence of his supposed support for Hamas and terrorism. The president's press secretary said that Homeland Security has leaflets he allegedly distributed with the Hamas logo and promoting Hamas views, but they have not been made public. He is being charged under a 1952 McCarthy era law, the McCarran-Walter Act, originally aimed at keeping out of the country Jewish Holocaust survivors that the U.S. government believed to be pro-Communist. The State Department argues that Khalil jeopardizes U.S. foreign policy in some way, but, as one of his lawyers said, it seems they want to deport him because he believes Palestinians have human rights and that Israel is committing genocide.

After being arrested, Khalil was sent to the Lasalle Detention Center in Jena, Louisiana—1,360 miles from New York City—to make it more difficult for his family, lawyers, community and the Palestine solidarity movement to support him. It was also an attempt to get his case heard in the much more rightwing 5th Circuit. The question is now will Khalil have a hearing at a court in New York or Louisiana. Now a second Palestinian Columbia student activist Leqaa Kordia has also been arrested, accused by Homeland Security of overstaying her F-1 student visa. And a third foreign student, Ranjani Srinivasan of India, had her student visa revoked for participating “in activities supporting Hamas.” Trump has punished Columbia University for failure to suppress the pro-Palestine solidarity movement by revoking \$400 million in grants.

A coalition of Palestinian groups, immigrant organizations, civil rights advocates, student groups, progressive and leftist organizations formed to support Khalil. Demonstrations demanding his release, mostly on university campuses, took place in New York, Michigan, Illinois, and California. In New York City the lobby of Trump Tower was occupied by three hundred members of Jewish Voice for Peace carrying banners reading, “You Can't Deport a Movement,” “Opposing Fascism is a Jewish Tradition,” and “Never Again for Anyone.” Police arrested 100 of the protestors who refused to leave when ordered to do so.

Senator Charles Schumer, the highest-ranking Jewish official in American history, said, “Look, I disagree, even abhor the views of Mahmoud Khalil, but we have free speech in America. And so, if the administration can't prove that he broke a law...they ought to drop the charges.” For that, Trump declared that “Schumer is a Palestinian as far as I'm concerned.... He used to be Jewish. He's not Jewish anymore. He's a Palestinian.” Jewish and Muslim organizations have condemned Trump's remarks.

Khalil's case has become a test for American democracy, particularly for academic freedom and crucial for immigrants. We need to continue to fight to protect him and to protect all of our rights.

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PS:

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