

'I Have No Idea, To Be Honest': Columbia Encampment Organizer Mahmoud Khalil Says It's Unclear Whether Hamas Targeted Civilians on Oct 7

'I wouldn't rule out that Hamas targeted civilians, but I wouldn't confirm it either,' Khalil said

[Zach Kessel](#) April 7, 2026

Mahmoud Khalil (Free Beacon)

Columbia University encampment leader Mahmoud Khalil said in an

[interview](#) that it's unclear whether Hamas targeted civilians in its Oct. 7, 2023, attack against Israel. Hamas is widely understood to have done so.

"I wouldn't rule out that Hamas targeted civilians, but I wouldn't confirm it either," Khalil told the *Forward* in a profile published Tuesday. "That's my position on this."

Khalil, a Syrian native and Algerian national who served as a negotiator for the Columbia University Apartheid Divest movement and whom the Trump administration has long attempted to deport, spent a large portion of the interview casting doubt on the idea that the terror group sought to massacre Israeli civilians—a conclusion that generally anti-Israel organizations like [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) drew in their own reports on the attack.

"I wouldn't say Hamas were saints or angels and did not commit any crimes," Khalil said. "The fact that civilians were caught up in such violence and the killing means that there were crimes committed, and Hamas has a responsibility for that."

Asked whether it was plausible that the civilians killed on Oct. 7—[upwards of 800](#), according to the Israeli government—were all killed incidentally, Khalil said, "I have no idea, to be honest."

In the same interview, Khalil stated that the anti-Israel movement's celebration of the Oct. 7 attack and use of [Hamas iconography](#) does not mean that all the movement's participants support Hamas. Instead, he told the *Forward*, many support the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

"A big part of this movement is LGBTQ, and of course they don't support Hamas," Khalil said. "That's why you see a lot of PFLP affection in this country just because it's the left-iest organization carrying out armed resistance."

"There should be a distinction between supporting legitimate armed resistance and supporting Hamas," he added.

The PFLP has been a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization [since 1997](#). It pioneered the tactic of hijacking airplanes and is responsible for the massacres of civilians in [bombings](#) and [mass shootings](#).

In several speaking engagements since the Trump administration began its deportation efforts, Khalil—who took part in illegal protests where agitators [disseminated](#) Hamas propaganda and [told](#) reporters he and his movement would push Columbia to divest itself from Israel by "[any available means necessary](#)"—lashed out when asked to condemn Hamas.

Most recently, he [said](#) "it's very racist to ask a Palestinian" to condemn Hamas at a March appearance at the South by Southwest festival. That answer came after a moderator asked him why he [dismissed](#) CNN reporter Pamela Brown's question about whether he condemned Hamas as "disingenuous and absurd" in an interview last July.

Months earlier, in June, Khalil said in an ABC News [interview](#) that the string of attacks against Jews in the United States over the past several years is a "direct result of the U.S. unconditional support to Israel," adding that violent acts amount to "desperate attempts to be heard." In an August [interview](#) with *New York Times* columnist Ezra Klein, Khalil said, "We couldn't avoid such a moment," referring to the Oct. 7 attacks. He added that Hamas committed the massacres "to break the cycle, to break that Palestinians are not being heard."

The Trump administration [detained](#) Khalil in March 2025, revoking his visa and green card. An immigration judge in September [ruled](#) that Khalil "willfully misrepresented" both his campus activism and work for the Hamas-tied U.N. Relief and Works Agency at the time of the Oct. 7 attack on his green card application. Though Khalil has since been released from custody, the Trump administration has said it plans to rearrest and deport

him following an appeals court [decision](#) that threw out a separate ruling ordering Khalil's release.

In the meantime, Khalil has met with the likes of New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani (D.), who [hosted](#) the activist and his family for dinner at Gracie Mansion last month. Mamdani described the anti-Israel radical as "a New Yorker" who "belongs in New York City."

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