

# Mahmoud Khalil Has Rights, Dammit

I can't defend what he said, but I defend his right to say it.

[Mona Charen](#)



Columbia University student Mahmoud Khalil talks to the press during the press briefing in New York City, United States on June 01, 2024. (Photo by Selcuk Acar/Anadolu via Getty Images)

**MAHMOUD KHALIL COULD HAVE BEEN** cooked up in a lab to offend—no, worse—to disgust me. And yet, despite temptation, I cannot endorse what the Trump administration is doing to him.

Based upon the postings of his group, Columbia University Apartheid Divest, Khalil, who was born in Syria, seems to hold grotesque opinions. CUAD, which helped lead the anti-Israel protests on Columbia's campus,

has cheered the October 7th pogrom that saw almost 1,200 Israelis killed and thousands more maimed and wounded, [writing](#), "The act of Palestinian resistance on October 7, known as the Al-Aqsa Flood, breached Israeli security and made significant military advances," adding that it was "a day that will go down in history." CUAD crowed that the October 7th attacks would be remembered as the "crowning achievement" of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, because the "Al-Aqsa Flood was the very essence of what it is to resist 'with what we have.'" Not a word of condemnation for the deaths of innocents, the [rapes](#), the immolation of whole families, nor the kidnappings.

CUAD has lavished praise on other terrorists and enemies of the United States and Israel, like Ismail Haniyeh and Hassan Nasrallah, leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah respectively, which gives you a flavor of the movement. And while some members of the organization at first distanced themselves from a student, Khymani James, who posted an [Instagram video](#) telling university officials that "Zionists don't deserve to live," and "Be grateful that I'm not just going out and murdering Zionists," CUAD's leadership later thought better of it and issued an [apology](#) to James and to all individuals involved in the movement for Palestinian liberation it "alienated" by "compromising our values and tailoring our actions and narrative to the mainstream media." In case there was any doubt, the letter also clarified that the group supports "liberation by any means necessary, including armed resistance."

In addition to celebrating the suffering and deaths of Israelis, CUAD has supported acts of domestic terrorism in the United States, praising Casey Goonan, an [arsonist](#) who carried out attacks on a federal building and the University of California in 2024.

"CUAD stands in full support of Casey Goonan and all of our comrades who have bravely undertaken the call to escalate for Palestine," the group [announced](#) in a statement. "The fires on UC campuses have been in direct

response to the university's violent police repression of their own students. The spark ignited on US campuses during the intifada of the last few months cannot be quelled, and further repression will only continue to transform these sparks into flames."

If I were vested with plenary authority to decide who could come to the United States, I would turn away someone like Mahmoud Khalil, who not only participates in but leads an organization that cheers terroristic violence. But no one in America has that plenary authority—we have laws and procedures, and under those laws, Khalil became a legal permanent resident. As such he enjoys most of the rights of a citizen. As law professor Steve Vladeck has [outlined](#), there are certain rare instances in which a green card-holder can be subject to deportation, as when "An alien whose presence or activities in the United States the Secretary of State has reasonable ground to believe would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States." But the law goes on to specify that aliens should not be deported for opinions or actions that "would be lawful within the United States" unless "the Secretary of State personally determines that the alien's [continued presence] would compromise a compelling United States foreign policy interest."

Perhaps our Gummy secretary of state would so certify, but that is an abuse of authority and a step toward tyranny. Khalil's views are execrable, but he has committed no crime and the government has made no showing that his continued presence in the country compromises a "compelling" foreign policy interest. He is being targeted because he's obnoxious and on the left. As Jonathan Chait [notes](#), claims of fighting antisemitism [ring a bit hollow](#) from an administration that just intervened to free the Tate brothers, hired a deputy press secretary at DOD [with a history of antisemitic posts](#), and is led by a man who dined with Kanye West and Nick Fuentes.

No, this is a salvo in a corrupt plan to punish speech Trump dislikes. Taking a law-abiding legal permanent resident [into custody](#) for speech crimes is un-American. Nor is it the only attack on fundamental liberties perpetrated in the past couple of weeks. Trump's executive order [targeting](#) the law firm Perkins Coie is another frontal assault. The risible EO attempts to [punish](#) the firm for representing "failed presidential candidate Hillary Clinton" and hiring the political consultancy Fusion GPS, among other supposed offenses. The order instructs federal agencies to terminate contracts with firm clients and to forbid all employees of Perkins Coie to enter federal buildings.

Or consider the exiling of the Associated Press for [declining](#) to abide by Trump's embarrassingly juvenile ukase about the "Gulf of America." Trump has also targeted another law firm, Covington & Burling, for representing Jack Smith. These flagrant assaults on American liberties are coming thick and fast and deserve our attention and alarm.

I won't defend Mahmoud Khalil's despicable views, but I will defend his rights. Though he supports movements and individuals who deny rights to those they oppose, we are not like him.

We live in a country governed by law—or at least, we are supposed to. If Khalil is to be deprived of his liberty, it can only be through due process of law. We defend his rights because if his are not secure, neither are ours.

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