

URGENT ACTION

STOP REVOKING VISAS OF FOREIGN STUDENTS

On 8 March US immigration authorities unlawfully arrested and arbitrarily detained Mahmoud Khalil for his role in student protests at Columbia University. Authorities revoked his permanent residency status under a rarely used law and placed him into deportation proceedings. At least nine other students are known to have been similarly targeted for their protest or expressive activity. Hundreds more have had their visas revoked with different and minimal justifications. We demand US authorities stop the retaliatory or unjustified revocation of students' visas and residency status and respect their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, due process and freedom from discrimination.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Secretary Kristi Noem
Department of Homeland Security
300 7th St, SW, Washington, DC 20024
USA
Email: dhssecretary@hq.dhs.gov

Dear Secretary Kristi Noem,

I am writing regarding the recent trend of targeting foreign students for repression, detention and potential deportation for either their activities in protests, speaking out in support of Palestinian rights and against the ongoing war crimes and genocide in the occupied Gaza Strip, or due to their backgrounds.

All students, faculty and staff have the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and due process and to be free from discrimination. However, following the detention of Mahmoud Khalil on 8 March and the revocation of his residency status, the US government revoked the student visas of seven identified individuals and is seeking to revoke the residency status of at least two other students who protested or spoke up about the conflict in the occupied Gaza Strip under an obscure and rarely used provision of immigration law. At least 1300 additional students are known to have had their visas revoked. However, many of these students never received notice of the revocation, nor did they participate in any protest or expressive activity on campus. Some students may have been targeted due to having committed minor crimes such as traffic violations. According to a lawsuit filed on behalf of students, many were targeted because of their country of origin, particularly those from African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Asian backgrounds.

These repressive tactics and the summary revocation of people's immigration status, whether due to their speech and protest activities or their country of origin, demonstrate an utter lack of respect for their human rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, due process and to be free from discrimination.

I urge you to restore the visas and immigration status of these students and visitors, release all students from immigration detention, refrain from deporting any of them, and end the targeting of students based on their immigration statuses and for exercising their human rights.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

On 8 March 2025, the US government detained Mahmoud Khalil, a former Columbia University graduate student who served as a spokesperson/negotiator for campus protesters and is a permanent residency. Soon after, the apprehension and detention of nine additional foreign students who participated in protests or spoke out against the war in the occupied Gaza Strip and the USA's role in the ongoing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and the revocation of their visas or residency status became public. Two of the students on visas decided to leave the country rather than face the inhumane conditions within the US immigration detention system and potential deportation. A video of the apprehension of a PhD student showed her being intercepted on the street near her home in late March by six plainclothes and mostly masked immigration officers and placed in an unmarked car. The agents reportedly refused to identify themselves until after she was detained. She co-wrote an opinion piece in her school newspaper criticizing her school's lack of response to the university students' demands regarding the genocide in Gaza. A US Department of Homeland Security spokesperson later claimed the student "engaged in activities in support Hamas" without providing any evidence. Another permanent resident who was an organizer of pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia University was detained by immigration officials as he attended an interview as part of his application for US citizenship.

On 27 March, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced he had revoked the visas of at least 300 students and visitors since January, claiming that the individuals engaged in "vandalizing universities, harassing students, taking over buildings, creating a ruckus" without providing any evidence. More recent reporting indicates that at least 1300 students had their visas revoked. Many of the impacted students claim they never engaged in protests and were never provided notice of the revocation, though some may have had some interaction with law enforcement during their stays, for even minor reasons such as a traffic ticket. According to a lawsuit filed on behalf of two students in California, students were targeted because they were from African, Arab, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim backgrounds. In furtherance of an Executive Order issued by President Trump to combat antisemitism, the US government is asserting that it has broad power under a rarely used component of immigration law to revoke the visas and residency statuses on foreign policy grounds and remove foreign students who participated in protests against the ongoing conflict in the occupied Gaza Strip. The statute, 8 USC 1251(a)(4)(C)(i), allows the Secretary of State to deport any noncitizen whom he has reasonable grounds to believe the noncitizen's "presence or activities...would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States." According to an amicus brief filed by immigration lawyers, law professors and scholars in support of Mahmoud Khalil, there have been some 11.7 million removal cases since the current law was enacted in 1990. In only 15 of those cases was that provision invoked and only four individuals ever were ultimately ordered removed or deported after being charged with removability under this ground. Furthermore, the US Department of Justice created a Joint Task Force to combat antisemitism "to eradicate antisemitic harassment in schools and on college campuses." The Joint Task Force announced visits to specific universities as part of its investigation as well as the withholding of federal grants and contracts from schools, allegedly for the schools' failure to protect the civil rights of Jewish students.

The US government has broad discretion to deny visas to applicants while they are abroad. Once individuals are within the USA, they are protected by the US Constitution, which includes the rights to free speech and due process. All people, regardless of immigration status, have the human rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and due process and to be free from discrimination. Students who refuse to abandon their studies and leave the country or who are detained by immigration officials risk being held in the US immigration detention system, which Amnesty International has [previously documented](#) fails to meet international standards.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 21 October 2025

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Foreign students and residents [they/them]

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: N/A