

Arrest of Palestinian Columbia activist divides US Jews

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Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg speaks at a demonstration in support of Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil, March 10, near Columbia University in New York City. (RNS photo/Fiona André)

The arrest of a former Columbia University graduate student who had a leading role on campus criticizing Israel's war in Gaza has sparked sharp divisions within the US Jewish community.

Mahmoud Khalil, an activist in last year's pro-Palestinian campus protests that led to tent encampments, was arrested by US immigration agents on Saturday as part of the Trump administration's pledge to deport anti-Israel student activists. Khalil, who is of Palestinian descent but grew up in Syria, is a permanent resident of the United States.

His arrest was hailed by some sectors of the US Jewish community, including the Anti-Defamation League, an organization that fights antisemitism. The ADL released a statement [applauding](#) the "swift and severe consequences for those who provide material support to foreign terrorist organizations." Khalil has not been charged with material or any other support to a terrorist organization.

Likewise, American Jewish Committee, a global Jewish advocacy organization, said in a March 11 statement it is "appalled by the views and actions" of Khalil and, "should the government prove its case in a prompt and public legal proceeding, and Khalil is afforded due process, then deportation will be fully justified."

Other Jews were outraged by the arrest, which they viewed as a blatant violation of civil liberties including free speech and the right to protest.

"The Trump administration is exploiting real concerns about antisemitism to undercut democracy," [wrote](#) Amy Spitalnick, CEO of the nonpartisan Jewish Council for Public Affairs, on social media site X. "As we've repeatedly said: this makes Jews — and so many others — less safe."

Khalil's arrest came a day after the Trump administration pulled \$400 million in federal funding from the university, claiming it hadn't addressed antisemitism that increased on campus since October 7, 2023.

The reaction to the arrest of the Palestinian activist shows a growing schism in the US Jewish community between those defending Israel and concerned with Jewish safety and those committed to longstanding liberal values that include speaking out against Israel.

IfNotNow, a Jewish organization critical of Israel, alongside the New York-based Jews for Racial & Economic Justice, mounted a demonstration with faculty from Columbia and Barnard College near the Columbia campus in Upper Manhattan on Monday. Another demonstration at Foley Square in Lower Manhattan drew hundreds of people waving Palestinian flags. They denounced violations to Khalil's First

Amendment rights and the broader implications for free speech.

Khalil is being held at a detention facility in Jena, Louisiana, awaiting immigration court proceedings. On Monday, a federal judge temporarily blocked the Trump administration's attempt to deport him. It is not clear on what grounds the government can deport a permanent resident without a criminal conviction.

Israel's overwhelming retaliation for the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack, in which it has killed close to 50,000 Palestinians, has led many US Jews to charge that Jews are victims of antisemitism.

At many colleges, Jewish students argued the takeovers of buildings during the protests prevented them from going to class. They also said materials handed out at encampments, some featuring denunciations of Zionism, the ideology undergirding the creation of Israel, and its occupation of Palestinian territory made them feel unsafe on campus.

But other Jews, including many Jewish students that participated in the pro-Palestinian campus protests, said criticism of Israel is not inherently antisemitic. Nor should it be labeled as "pro-terrorist," or "pro-Hamas," as the Trump administration and other staunch Israel supporters have tried to do.

"It should be obvious to everyone that what is happening on this campus, or to this campus, is not about protecting Jews," said professor Marianne Hirsch of Columbia Jewish Faculty Group. "My committed Jewish faculty colleagues and I have warned that the false characterization of (Columbia University) as a hotbed of antisemitism would be used as an alibi for what's actually at stake for the Republican establishment and now the Trump administration—strict control of speech, of protest and of higher education at large."

Hillel, the Jewish student organization on college campuses, which tracks reports of antisemitism on campus and works to safeguard Jewish students, did not respond to requests for comment.

The Union for Reform Judaism, the largest Jewish denomination in the United States, likewise declined to comment.

In an interview, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, said, "Any efforts to address the intolerable episodes of

antisemitism that Jewish students have endured at Columbia University must guarantee due process under the law.”

Rabbi Moshe Hauer, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, had a different opinion.

He told [the New York Times](#) that “new, aggressive and legal tactics are clearly needed” to deal with antisemitism.

It is not yet clear how immigration officials learned about Khalil or what he is being charged with. In emails Khalil sent to Columbia administrators, he knew he was being targeted and sought protection.

“Since yesterday, I have been subjected to a vicious, coordinated and dehumanizing doxxing campaign led by Columbia affiliates Shai Davidai and David Lederer who, among others, have labeled me a security threat and called for my deportation,” he wrote in an email obtained by the [Zeteeo](#) news organization, referring by name to current and former Columbia faculty who have allegedly gone after him in a doxxing campaign. (Doxxing is when personally identifiable information about an individual or organization is made public, usually online.)

Meanwhile, The Intercept [reported](#) that the WhatsApp group Columbia Alumni for Israel, which has over 1,000 members, sought the deportation of any international student critical of Israel.

It is also possible Columbia University itself provided immigration agents with information. The university was subpoenaed by the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce last year and asked to turn over all disciplinary proceedings against pro-Palestinian protesters since October 7, 2023. Columbia [submitted](#) the documents in compliance with the committee’s August 21 subpoena, raising concerns about confidentiality and student privacy, including violation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

Last year, Khalil was suspended from his graduate program for his role in the campus demonstrations, but the suspension was reversed for lack of evidence, and he completed his degree in December 2024.

Khalil was active in Columbia University Apartheid Divest, a coalition of student organizations that see Palestine as the vanguard for their collective liberation. He is

married, and his wife, a US citizen, is eight months pregnant.

Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg of Malkhut, a progressive Jewish congregation in Queens, attended Monday's rally near Columbia, saying she felt compelled to speak out against Khalil's arrest.

"I need to make it very clear that the Trump administration and the way they speak about protecting Jews from antisemitism does not stand for us, for me, and that the majority of the Jewish community in this country cares about higher education, cares about free speech," she said. "As a Jew, as a rabbi, as a Jewish leader, it's very important to me for Americans to understand that (Trump) doesn't speak for Jews."

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