

# URGENT ACTION

## STOP TARGETTING FOREIGN STUDENTS FOR PROTEST

Since the 8 March arrest and arbitrary detention of Mahmoud Khalil for his role in student protests at Columbia University – at least nine other students were similarly targeted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Thousands more had their visas revoked without justification. US authorities are weaponizing immigration enforcement through the revocation of visas or status and deporting people who protested the ongoing genocide in Gaza. 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](mailto:dhssecretary@hq.dhs.gov)

Dear Secretary Kristi Noem,

*I am alarmed to learn about the ongoing crackdown on foreign students who are simply exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly. As you are already aware, all students, faculty and staff should be able to exercise their human rights and be free from discrimination.*

*It is distressing that the US government has targeted a number of students who protested or spoke out about the conflict in the occupied Gaza Strip under an obscure and rarely used provision of immigration law. Courtroom testimony revealed that immigration authorities relied on third party doxxing websites to target these students. Federal courts have stepped in to order the release of those students and questioned the US government's use of this law as a violation of their right free speech.*

*At least 6000 students are known to have had their visas revoked as of August 2025. 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 were 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.*

*During a recent trial where the judge ruled that the government's targeting of international students for deportation due to their pro-Palestinian advocacy was unconstitutional, international faculty and staff testified how the US government's targeting chilled their rights to engage in protests on campus or engage in discussions about certain topics for fear of being reported, detained and deported.*

*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 therefore urge you to restore the visas and immigration status of these students and visitors, release any remaining students or protesters 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. Federal courts have since ordered all detained students to be released as they continue to challenge their immigration cases.

Amnesty International [research](#) documents how the State Department's repressive AI-driven "Catch and Revoke" initiative combines constant social media monitoring, visa status tracking, and automated threat assessments of foreign individuals on visas, including international students, risking arbitrary and unlawful visa revocations, detentions, deportations and violations of the rights to privacy, freedom of expression and access to information, freedoms of movement equality and non-discrimination, and the right to liberty and protest.

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 a legal filing, 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.

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](#) as cruel, abusive, and 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 March 2026

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:** <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr51/9290/2025/en/>

## ADDITIONAL TARGETS

His Excellency Mr Warren Stephens  
*Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary*  
**U.S. Embassy**  
33 Nine Elms Lane, SW11 7US  
CF020 7499 9000  
Monday-Friday 0830-1730  
Salutation: Your Excellency