

GUEST ESSAY

I Was Detained for My Beliefs. Who Will Be Next?

May 2, 2025

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Mr. Mahdawi is a Palestinian human rights advocate and Columbia University student.

On April 14, 2025, I was detained during what should have been my citizenship naturalization interview. After more than two weeks of unjust imprisonment, a federal judge ruled in favor of releasing me. In a major victory for democracy, I may be the first of the many student activists who have been detained by the Trump administration to be freed from detention.

The Department of Homeland Security had effectively orchestrated a trap. It dangled the prospect of becoming an American citizen, only for masked agents to apprehend me after I finished the interview and signed a document saying I was willing to take an oath of allegiance. Government agents separated me from my lawyer, who had gone to the appointment with me. They planned to whisk me from my home state, Vermont, to a detention facility in Louisiana.

The trap was not a complete surprise to me. It came after other arrests of students for exercising their right to free speech in opposing Israel's relentless killing and destruction in Gaza. I had prepared by contacting lawyers, my Vermont senators

and my House representative, the media and a group of community members. The Department of Homeland Security's plan did not go smoothly, as we missed the flight to Louisiana by minutes. Those few minutes changed the course of my legal case and, ultimately, led to my freedom from detention because I was able to fight for my rights on fair ground. Unlike other students who continue to languish in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody, I've been afforded the "privilege" to seek justice while not in prison.

Despite spending 16 nights in a jail cell, I never lost hope in the inevitability of justice and the principles of democracy. I wanted to become a citizen of this country because I believe in the principles that it enshrines. When Judge Geoffrey W. Crawford ruled in my favor, he reassured me, along with the American people, that there is still reason to hope in those principles. But the road to justice is long. My freedom is intertwined with the freedom of the other students, who exercised the same free speech rights as I did yet languish in jail, and is intertwined with that of the Palestinians, who are fighting for their right to life and justice, too.

The American government accuses me of undermining U.S. foreign policy, a patently absurd pretext for deportation for political speech that the Trump administration dislikes. The government is scraping the bottom of the barrel in its attempts to smear me. My only "crime" is refusing to accept the slaughter of Palestinians, opposing war and promoting peace. I have simply insisted that international law must be respected. I believe the way to a just and long-lasting peace for Palestinians and Israelis is through diplomacy and restorative justice.

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By seeking to deport me, the Trump administration is sending a clear message: There is no room for dissent, free speech be damned. It seems willing to shield an extremist Israeli government from criticism at the expense of constitutional rights,

all while suppressing the possibility of a peaceful future for both Palestinians and Israelis, a future free of trauma and fear.

I dream of justice and peace, a dream shaped by the nightmarish memories of my childhood. I was born a third-generation refugee in Al-Far'a camp in the West Bank under Israel's apartheid system. When I was 8 years old, I buried my brother when he died a few years after an Israeli military siege blocked his access to medical care, ultimately resulting in fatal health issues. Instead of celebrating my 11th birthday, I walked in my uncle's funeral procession after he was killed by the Israeli military. I witnessed an Israeli soldier kill my best childhood friend when I was 11.

When the Department of Homeland Security took me into custody, the agent apologized in advance but then handcuffed me, chained my hands to my waist and shackled my feet. I jokingly said, while taking short steps, "This is how I do walking meditation," to distract myself from thinking about helpless Palestinians in Israeli jails who were shackled just like me, some of them sexually abused and killed. "Breathe in love, breathe out love," I told myself as we drove away.

In Cell No. C38, where I spent my first night, I saw a flashlight peeking through the darkness as the night guard did his routine check. At that moment I became aware that I was now connected to my grandfather, father, uncles and cousins, who were all also unjustly imprisoned. I prayed that my future children would not suffer the same injustice. As I fell asleep, I thought of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous quote: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Before moving to the United States in 2014, freedom was an abstract concept for me, something I could barely imagine while living under Israeli military occupation. I sang for freedom, wrote poems about it and dreamed of living it but had never experienced it. I longed for physical freedom — the ability to travel without encountering a military checkpoint — and for the right to free speech, both of which I found in America.

Ultimately, I sought American citizenship not only because I did not want to lose the freedom I enjoyed as a permanent resident but even more so because I believe in the principles and values of democracy, which this country stipulates in its founding documents. While America has not always lived up to those values, like Dr. King, I believe they serve as a promise of what's possible.

These very freedoms are under attack today, both for me and for others like me. The Trump administration is hewing to Israel's playbook: Under the thinly veiled guise of security, rights are being denied and due process eliminated. The administration is silencing its critics by deploying Immigration and Customs Enforcement to detain noncitizen dissidents and is compromising the integrity of the immigration system.

Once the repression of dissent, in the name of security, becomes a key objective of a government, authoritarian rule and even martial law are not far off. When they look at my case, all Americans should ask themselves: What is left of our democracy, and who will be targeted next?

Israel's actions in Gaza have resulted in the deaths of more than 52,000 Palestinians since Oct. 7, 2023, according to the Gazan Health Ministry. A majority of the dead are women and children, and a recent study suggests the number is likely a vast undercount. This is a war of madness and revenge that relies on American weapons, funded by U.S. taxpayer dollars and justified by American politicians.

My case reveals how the struggles for justice for Americans and Palestinians are connected. Americans must decide whether to support war or peace, oppression or democracy. If we cannot speak up against the killing of children and what human rights experts have called a genocide in Gaza, what can we speak out against?

Mohsen Mahdawi is a Palestinian human rights advocate based in Vermont. He was born and raised in a refugee camp in the West Bank, and is studying philosophy at Columbia University.

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