




## Mahmoud Khalil's Letter From Jail to His Son

**To my newborn son: I am absent not out of apathy, but conviction. Deen, the grief I feel being apart from you is one drop in a sea of sorrow Palestinian families have drowned in for generations**

*May 12, 2025* Mahmoud Khalil /

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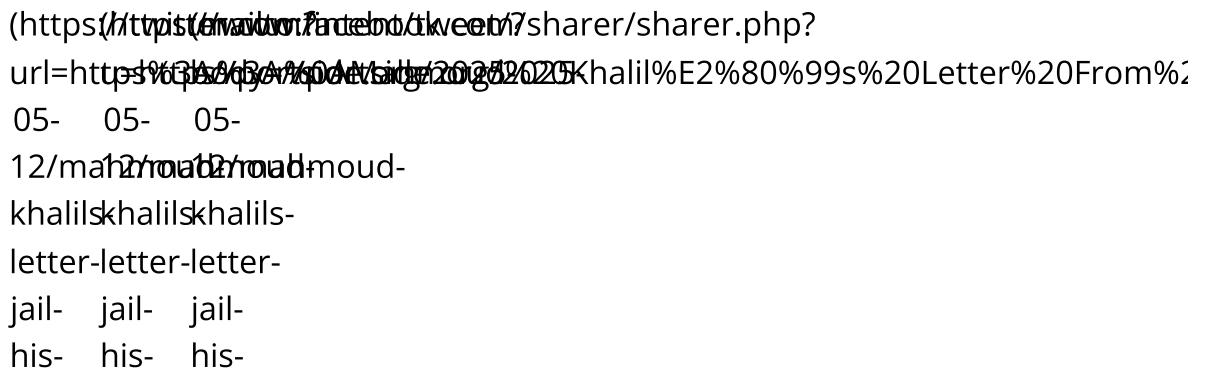


Mahmoud Khalil at the Columbia University protest encampment in New York City on April 29, 2024.,AP Photo/Ted Shaffrey

**Y**aba Deen,\* it has been two weeks since you were born (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/21/mahmoud-khalil-ice-noor-abdalla-birth>), and these are my first words to you.

In the early hours of 21 April, I waited on the other end of a phone as your mother labored to bring you into this world. I listened to her pained breaths and tried to speak comforting words into her ear over the crackling line. During your first moments, I buried my face in my arms and kept my voice low so that the 70 other men sleeping in this concrete room would not see my cloudy eyes or hear my voice catch. I feel suffocated by my rage and the cruelty of a system that deprived your mother and me of sharing this experience. Why do faceless politicians have the power to strip human beings of their divine moments?

Since that morning, I have come to recognize the look in the eyes of every father in this detention center. I sit here contemplating the immensity of your birth and wonder how many more firsts will be sacrificed to the whims of the US government, which denied me even the chance of furlough to attend your birth. How is it that the same politicians who preach “family values” are the ones tearing families apart?



Deen, my heart aches that I could not hold you in my arms and hear your first cry, that I could not unfurl your clenched fists or change your first diaper. I am sorry that I was not there to hold your mother's hand or to recite the adhan, or call to prayer, in your ear. But my absence is not unique. Like other Palestinian fathers, I was separated from you by racist regimes and distant prisons. In Palestine, this pain is part of daily life. Babies are born every day without their fathers – not because their fathers chose to leave, but because they are taken by war, by bombs, by prison cells and by the cold machinery of occupation. The grief your mother and I feel is but one drop in a sea of sorrow that Palestinian families have drowned in for generations.



Deen, it was not a gap in the law that made me a political prisoner in Louisiana. It was my firm belief that our people deserve to be free, that their lives are worth more than the televised massacre we are witnessing in Gaza, and that the displacement that began in 1948 and culminated in the current genocide must finally end. This mere belief is what made the state scramble to detain me. No matter where I am when you read this – whether I’m in this country or another – I want to impress upon you one lesson:

The struggle for Palestinian liberation is not a burden; it is a duty and an honor we carry with pride. So at every turning point in my life, you will find me choosing Palestine. Palestine over ease. Palestine over comfort. Palestine over self. This struggle is sweeter than a life without dignity. The tyrants want us to submit, to obey, to be perfect victims. But we are free, and we will remain free. I hope you feel this as deeply as I do.

Deen, as a Palestinian refugee, I inherited a kind of exile that followed me to every border, every airport, every form. Borders mean something to me that they may not mean to you. Each crossing required me to prove my docility, my identity and my very right to exist. You were born an American citizen. You may never feel that weight. You may never have to translate your humanity through paperwork, countless visa applications and interview appointments. I hope you use this not to separate yourself from others, but to uplift those who live under the same circumstances that once constrained me. But I won't pretend this citizenship protects you. Not completely. Not when you have my name. Not when those in power still see our people as threats.

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One day, you might ask why people are punished for standing up for Palestine, why truth and compassion feel dangerous to power. These are hard questions, but I hope our story shows you this: the world needs more courage, not less. It needs people who choose justice over convenience.

It is nothing but the dehumanization and racist disregard for Palestinians that renders their lives forgettable and that dares describe Palestinian fathers who love their sons as "terrorists". Perhaps that is why the world so quickly forgot the killing of four-month-old Iman Hijjo (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/may/08/israel1>) in Gaza in 2001. Why did Ahmed Abu Artema ([https://www.democracynow.org/2023/11/6/ahmed\\_abu\\_artema](https://www.democracynow.org/2023/11/6/ahmed_abu_artema))'s beloved son Abdullah die hungry for bread? Who recalls the children lost in the Flour Massacre (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/05/un-experts-condemn-israeli-massacre-of-palestinians-collecting-flour>)? Where is the justice for the fathers in the West Bank who carefully dress their sons for prison? Why does liberty not visit the bodies of Palestinian children whose limbs are missing, whose ribs are exposed under thin skin and who are born lovingly only to die under an Israeli bomb?

On this first Mother's Day for Noor

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/08/mahmoud-khalil-wife-letter>), I dream of a world where all families are reunited to celebrate the incredible women in their lives. Many years ago, on one of our very first dates, I had asked your mother what she would change in the world if she could. Her simple response was: "I just want people to be nicer to each other." Deen, you were born to a mother as gentle as she is fierce. I pray that you live in a world shaped by that kindness. I hope, with all my heart, that you will not witness the oppression that I've known. I hope that you never need to chant for Palestine, because it has long been free with dignity and prosperity for all. Should that day come, know that it was ushered in through the courage of those who came before you. I am certain that in this new world, you and I will visit Tiberias together, drink from the river and marvel at the sea. There, in a free and just Palestine, you will see the fruits of our struggle.

Deen, my love for you is deeper than anything I have ever known. Loving you is not separate from the struggle for liberation. It is liberation itself. I fight for you, and for every Palestinian child whose life deserves safety, tenderness and freedom. I hope one day you will stand tall knowing your father was not absent out of apathy, but out of conviction. And I will spend my life making up for the moments we lost – starting with this one, writing to you with all the love in my heart.

*\*Yaba Deen: "Yaba" (يَا بَا) is an affectionate term meaning "dad" in Arabic. In Palestinian Arabic, yaba is often used self-referentially to center the father-son bond in the greeting itself. So when a father says "yaba", he's using a tender, fatherly voice to address his child, somewhat like saying: "From your dad, Deen" or "My son, from your yaba (dad)".*

Mahmoud Khalil (/mahmoud-khalil)

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