



Urgent Action Office 3-1992 Yonge Street Toronto ON M4S 1Z7 Phone: (416) 363-9933 Fax: (416) 363-3103 urgentaction@amnesty.ca
Second UA: 42/25 Index: AMR 51/0419/2025 USA of October 21, 2025

USA

STOP TARGETING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FOR PROTESTING

Since the arrest and arbitrary detention of Mahmoud Khalil on March 8 for taking part in student protests at Columbia University, at least nine other students have faced similar targeting for speaking out. Thousands more have had their visas taken away without reason. U.S. authorities are using immigration laws to punish people who protested the ongoing genocide in Gaza. They are revoking visas, cancelling status, and deporting students for exercising their rights. We call on U.S. authorities to stop unfairly or retaliatorily revoking students' visas and residency status. All students must be free to express themselves and join peaceful protests without fear. The government must respect their rights to free expression, peaceful assembly, due process, and freedom from discrimination.

Write to the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security urging her office to:

- I Restore the visas and immigration status of all affected students and visitors.
- Release any remaining students or protesters held in immigration detention.
- Stop deportations of students and protesters related to these events.
- End the targeting of students based on their immigration status or for exercising their human rights.

Write to:

Secretary Kristi Noem
300 7th St SW,
Washington, DC 20024,
United States
Email: kristi.noem@hq.dhs.gov
Salutation: Dear Secretary Noem

And copy:

His Excellency Peter Hoekstra
Ambassador
Embassy of the United States of America
490 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, ON K1N 1G8
Tel: (613) 238-5335 / 688-5335 (24h) Fax: (613) 688-3082

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

As of August 2025, at least 6,000 international students have had their visas revoked. Many never received notice and had no connection to any protest or expressive activity on campus. Some were targeted for minor offences, such as traffic violations.

A lawsuit filed on behalf of affected students says many were singled out because of their country of origin, especially those from African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Asian backgrounds. This pattern raises serious concerns about discrimination and racial profiling.

In a recent trial, a judge ruled that targeting international students for deportation because of their pro-Palestinian advocacy was unconstitutional. During the proceedings, international faculty and staff described how this targeting created a climate of fear on campuses. Many said they now avoid protests or even classroom discussions about sensitive topics, worried they could be reported, detained, or deported.

On March 8, 2025, U.S. authorities detained Mahmoud Khalil, a former Columbia University graduate student and spokesperson for campus protesters who holds permanent residency. Soon after, nine more foreign students who participated in protests or spoke out against the war in Gaza were detained and had their visas or residency revoked.

Two students chose to leave the country rather than endure inhumane conditions in U.S. immigration detention or face deportation. One PhD student was forcibly taken by six masked immigration officers near her home. They refused to identify themselves until after detaining her. She had co-written an opinion piece criticizing her university's silence on the genocide in Gaza. Officials later accused her, without evidence, of supporting Hamas.

Another student organizer was detained by immigration officials during his U.S. citizenship interview. Federal courts have since ordered all detained students to be released while they continue to challenge their immigration cases.

Amnesty International has documented the State Department's repressive AI-driven "Catch and Revoke" program. The initiative uses social media monitoring, visa tracking, and automated "threat assessments" to target foreign nationals, including students. This system has led to arbitrary visa cancellations, detentions, deportations, and violations of rights to privacy, freedom of expression, equality, and protest.

The U.S. government claims it has broad powers under an obscure immigration law to revoke visas on "foreign policy" grounds. This law, 8 USC 1251(a)(4)(C)(i), allows the Secretary of State to deport any non-citizen believed to have "adverse foreign policy consequences" for the U.S. Since the law's creation in 1990, it has been used in only 15 out of 11.7 million cases, and only four people were ever deported under it.

Everyone, regardless of immigration status, has the right to free expression, peaceful assembly, due process, and freedom from discrimination. Those who remain in detention or refuse to abandon their studies risk being held in a system that Amnesty International has long documented as cruel, abusive, and below international standards.

Please take action as soon as possible until March 21, 2026 or until released. The UA will be duly updated should there be the need for further action.