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Protesters rally in support of detained Palestinian activist Mahmoud Khalil, Friday, March 14 in New York. (AP/Jason DeCrow)

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What do our Catholic social justice teachings call us to do in a moment when a family is being separated and which legal experts are [calling](#) one of the biggest threats to First Amendment freedom in 50 years?

This is the question we face when we consider the case of Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian graduate of Columbia University and green card holder who was [arrested](#) on March 8 by U.S. immigration agents. His wife, [Noor Abdalla](#), an American citizen who is eight months pregnant with their first child, was also threatened with arrest.

Khalil had been a [student leader](#), mediating between protesters and administrators, in the spring 2024 pro-Palestine protests at Columbia that spread nationwide calling for a Gaza ceasefire and divestment from Israel. Khalil was put in a Louisiana detention facility far from his family; a judge has temporarily [blocked](#) the Trump administration from deporting him and ordered that his case be [moved to New Jersey](#).

In the meantime, more students and scholars have been targeted. One is Georgetown University researcher and Indian national [Badar Khan Suri](#) who was [arrested and threatened with deportation](#), accused of spreading Hamas propaganda, [which his lawyers deny](#). Suri was not charged with any crime. A judge has blocked the deportation of Suri, who has a valid visa and is married to a U.S. citizen.

The detainment of Khalil, Suri and others must be understood in the context of this administration's push for mass deportations. Pope Francis described the policy in a [letter](#) to the U.S. bishops as one that "damages the dignity of many men and women, and of entire families, and places them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness." The treatment of Mahmoud Khalil has damaged the dignity of a family, separated by 1,200 miles as Khalil's wife is soon to give birth.

In a [statement](#), his wife Noor said, "We've been excitedly preparing to welcome our baby, and now Mahmoud has been ripped away from me for no reason at all." She described her husband's arrest as traumatizing: "US Immigration ripped my soul from me when they handcuffed my husband and forced him into an unmarked vehicle," she [wrote](#).

It is incumbent upon Catholics to raise our voices to keep families together from the threat of unlawful deportation and to support free expression, the right to nonviolent protest, and due process.

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Suri's wife, Mapheze Saleh, a Palestinian American citizen and also a Georgetown student, has [shared](#) that their three children "keep asking about him and when he will come back" and that she can't bear to explain what has really happened to their father.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — in a January statement on immigration reform — [said](#) "family unity should remain a cornerstone" of the U.S. immigration system and "dehumanization or vilification of noncitizens as a means to deprive them of protection under law is not only contrary to the rule of law but an affront to God himself, who has created them in his own image."

Such arrests and detentions must also be understood in the context of issues of free speech and due process, in regard to pro-Palestine activism and more broadly. It occurs, in part, as a result of an [executive order](#) Trump issued on Jan. 29 that laid the foundation for the government to deport international students who participated in protests against Israel's actions in Gaza.

The Jesuit Conference's Office of Justice and Ecology, echoing the U.S. bishops, has [asserted](#) that immigration enforcement efforts "should be targeted, proportional, and humane," prioritizing individuals who pose an actual "threat" as dangers to society and minimizing "reliance on detention."

They and the U.S. bishops have emphasized that "due process should be ensured." And yet, Khalil is detained, like Suri, with [no criminal charge or conviction](#). His lawyer [reports](#) that the ICE officers told her by phone that they had a warrant to revoke a student visa (Khalil holds a green card and is a permanent legal U.S. resident,) at the time of his apprehension. Noor said that neither she nor her husband were [shown any warrant](#) before he was taken away.

Due process requires an accurate and clear depiction of events. A [fact sheet](#) on the executive order explained that the Trump administration would "Deport Hamas sympathizers and revoke student visas" for all "resident aliens" who joined in "pro-jihadist" protests. It paints the campus protests with a broad brush, equating pro-Palestinian views and critique of Israel's military assault on Gaza with being antisemitic and supporting Hamas. The anti-war demonstrations that took place on campuses, including at Catholic universities, were [97% peaceful](#) and included many Jewish students.

Pope Francis also [called](#) for a ceasefire as early as Oct. 29, 2023. Catholic social teaching affirms the rights of conscience and the struggle for justice. We can look to examples of protest against injustice within the Jesuit and Catholic traditions, including the 1990s [movement to shut down](#) the U.S. Army School of the Americas, which trained soldiers who participated in the killing of the Jesuits at the University of Central America in El Salvador.

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Citing a section of federal immigration law, the administration has also [asserted](#) that Khalil is a foreign policy threat but has provided no details or evidence to back up the claim. Instead, they now [argue](#) that Khalil's not having listed prior work with United Nations and U.K. agencies in his immigration application is grounds for deportation. His lawyers say the allegations are retaliation against his protected political speech. Protests can be unwieldy, and speech can be strident, but the right to free expression and free assembly are bedrock First Amendment principles that also apply to permanent legal residents and visa holders.

It is incumbent upon Catholics to raise our voices to keep families together from the threat of unlawful deportation and to support free expression, the right to nonviolent protest, and due process. In a [letter](#) from jail, Khalil wrote that "justice escapes the contours of this nation's immigration facilities" and described his detention as indicative of broader anti-Palestinian racism and targeting of the right to protest for Palestine.

It is also incumbent upon Catholics to uphold the human rights of Palestinians, to reject antisemitism and Islamophobia, and to continue to push for a [just peace](#) that will bring safety, dignity and equality to all Palestinians and Israelis in the Holy Land.

The detention of Mahmoud Khalil — and suppression of voices in support of Palestinian freedom — makes those goals ever more distant.

*\*This commentary has been updated throughout to clarify Badar Khan Suri's legal situation.*