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## *Abducting Bodies, Silencing Dissent: Mahmoud Khalil and the Rise of State Terror*



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### **Introduction**

The abduction of Mahmoud Khalil is not an isolated event—it is a chilling testament to the authoritarian turn in the United States, where dissent is met not with debate but with brute force, and the machinery of state terror moves with ruthless precision. In his own words, Khalil, a Columbia University graduate, an activist for Palestinian freedom, and a permanent U.S. resident, was seized by ICE agents without warning—handcuffed, dragged from his apartment lobby, shoved into an unmarked black car, and disappeared. In minutes, his rights were violated and his body made vulnerable and disposable. Khalil instantly became another casualty in the Trump administration’s escalating war against those who refuse to kneel before its politics of white supremacy, settler-colonial violence, ominous threats, and

unchecked lawlessness. His disappearance is both a precedent and a warning—a stark reminder that in regimes built on repression, silence is coerced, and resistance is a crime.

What happened to Khalil echoes through history, from the Gestapo's pursuit of political dissidents to the "Dirty Wars" of Latin America, where students, intellectuals, and activists were labeled as terrorists and made to vanish without a trace. The equating of dissent with terrorism is a central feature of authoritarian regimes. The end point of which is the torture chamber, prisons, concentration camps, and the death of any vestige of human rights, civil liberties, and democracy. Today, those same logics of power are being reanimated under the guise of national security, as Trump's government systematically dismantles the right to protest, the sanctity of citizenship, and the democratic ideals that once stood as a bulwark against tyranny.

To understand Khalil's abduction is to confront the broader assault on dissent in an era where the state wields the power to disappear those who refuse to conform or be complicit. The illegal abduction of Khalil is not only about the attack on free speech, but also about the gutting of historical memory, civic literacy, and the institutions that provide a culture of critique that creates informed citizens. The state terrorism on display in Khalil's case is not just about one student, one protest, or one administration—it is about the fate of democracy itself. The question now is not whether we recognize these warning signs, but whether we act before it is too late.

### **The Nightmare Returns**

Trump's return to the White House has unleashed a full-scale assault on civil liberties, democratic institutions, and the very possibility of holding power accountable. No longer constrained by those who once sought to temper his worst impulses, Trump now governs with open contempt for the rule of law, emboldened by a movement that thrives on cruelty, grievance, and unrelenting violence. His language has always been a weapon—honed by fear, sharpened by menace, and wielded to incite violence against immigrants, Black Americans, and anyone who dares to challenge his rule.

For years, the mainstream press dismissed Trump's rhetoric as nothing more than bluster—an act designed for entertainment or spectacularized provocation rather than a genuine call to power. His declaration of wanting to be a "dictator for a day" and a subsequent quote, "He who saves his Country does not violate any Law," were met with little more than a shrug, treated with barely a flicker of concern. Many assumed his fascist threats were nothing but empty theatrics, comforted by the belief that handlers and legal restraints would keep him in check. But that illusion has now been shattered.

As his second presidency unfolds, the machinery of authoritarianism is no longer emerging—it is fully operational. The punishing state now stands boldly, criminalizing dissent, weaponizing the justice system, dismantling public and higher education, abducting individuals, embracing corruption, and executing mass deportations with a cold, calculating efficiency that evokes some of America’s darkest historical chapters. This legacy echoes in the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, when thousands of leftists, anarchists, and immigrants were arrested without cause, often enduring brutal treatment. The Red Scare, especially during the McCarthy era of the 1950s, marked another grim chapter, as government-sanctioned witch hunts destroyed lives and careers on the flimsiest of accusations. In the wake of the Vietnam War, opposition to the conflict was labeled un-American, culminating in the tragic deaths of students at Kent State. More recently, the Bush administration’s War on Terror after 9/11 extended this grim tradition, with mass surveillance, indefinite detention, and the widespread abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay—all justified in the name of national security.

From the Palmer Raids and McCarthyism to the abuses of the Bush era, these events form a brutal continuum, each rooted in the criminalization of dissent and the targeting of marginalized communities. They expose the long-standing tradition of the state using its powers of repression to quash opposition and enforce ideological orthodoxy. Trump has not only laid bare this dark legacy of state violence and the war on dissent, he has also modernized it, appropriating tactics honed during the “Dirty Wars” in Argentina, the deadly repression of students under Pinochet in Chile, and the Gestapo-like methods employed by Nazi Germany in service of racial cleansing and the politics of disposability. In doing so, he has reinvigorated a dangerous historical playbook, turning it into a weapon against those who dare to resist and those who support the notion of universal citizenship.

### **History Matters**

History—and the dangerous memories it carries—matters because it exposes the lingering shadows of authoritarianism, offering warnings essential to recognizing and resisting its return in new forms. As Paul Gilroy reminds us, “Those horrors are always much closer to us than we like to imagine. Preventing their recurrence requires keeping them in mind.” Fascism today is not a replica of the past, but its mobilizing passions remain dangerously familiar. Primo Levi’s prescient warning echoes in our time: “Every age has its own fascism, and we see the warning signs wherever the concentration of power denies citizens the possibility and the means of expressing and acting on their own free will.”

Under Trump, the treatment of dissenters does not mirror exactly what we saw under Hitler, Pinochet, or the Argentine dictatorship, but it bears what Martin Wolf has called “authoritarianism with fascist characteristics.” As history teaches, repression begins with language before it becomes law, and law before it becomes violence. The Nazis labeled dissenters as terrorists, with Heinrich Himmler making clear that students who defied the Reich had no place in its vision, likening them to pests that needed to be eradicated. Pinochet branded universities as breeding grounds for terrorists, justifying mass arrests, torture, and executions. Argentina’s military regime abducted students hurled them from planes and murdered over 30,000. Trump’s administration has not committed such atrocities, but the rhetoric and policies are in place. The machinery is being built, and history warns us: once the conditions are set, the horrors we thought belonged to the past can return in forms we failed to imagine.

It is crucial to emphasize that the abduction and state persecution of Khalil and other students fighting for Palestinian freedom, along with their defense of the university as a democratic public good, is not merely an assault on free speech and academic freedom—it is a direct embodiment of what G.M. Tamas identifies as the core feature of fascism: “hostility to universal citizenship.” As part of his grab for uncontested power, Trump views citizenship as only something he can grant rather than a constitutional right. Tamas views this rightly as central feature of what he calls post-fascism.

This reveals something even more insidious and deadly: Trump’s relentless tirades against communists, trans people, immigrants, Black people, Jews, and LGBTQ individuals are not just acts of ideological aggression—they are attempts to strip these groups of their very humanity. As Tamas notes, framing them “as non-citizens,” Trump casts them as non-human, relegating them to a status beneath recognition and rights. This dehumanization is the very linchpin of fascism, paving the way for the violence that inevitably follows—violence framed as justified, even necessary. The barbaric actions of ICE and other elements of the punishing state, function as “a racial police force”—engaged in often illegal, sensationalized arrests and abductions of students, and grotesque chain gang marches of immigrants—carry a dark racial undertone. The defense of these actions are laced with the poison of racist police brutality and emboldened vigilantism, poisoning communities and revealing the deep, dangerous roots of racialized violence that is spreading to every corner of American society.

### **Domestic Terrorism as the Organizing Principle of Politics**

For Trump and his morally vacuous sycophants, war has become the negation of democracy, if not politics itself. With its focus on the elimination of dissidents, critics, and those

considered disloyal and disposable, the militarization of all aspects of society moves from the margins of society “the very heart of governance. As Theodore Adorno and others have illuminated, Trump’s actions echo long-established patterns of domination, crystallizing into a chilling celebration of hierarchy, power, cruelty, and the cult of masculinity, all underscored by a profound disdain for those deemed weak. In his alignment with authoritarian figures, Trump not only venerates dictators but also threatens to unravel alliances forged over generations, launching trade wars and territorial aggression in his wake. His regime is not merely lawless—it is a deliberate and systematic dismantling of democratic norms, reshaping the United States into a fascist order where power is consolidated, the billionaire class is enriched, and opposition is silenced through fear, repression, and the chaos he himself stirs. This is not governance, but a descent into a state of perpetual turmoil, designed to secure control at any cost.

This brand of authoritarian governance is most evident in its assault on higher and public education, waging a relentless campaign to ban books on gender, Black history, and courses addressing transgender issues and pressing social injustices. But it doesn’t stop there. As Jason Stanley notes, Trump’s plan to dismantle the Department of Education is a brazen attempt to strip funding from Title I, a program that provides essential federal support for students in underfunded urban and rural schools, special education programs for disabled students, and a host of other vital educational initiatives. Weaponizing a fabricated charge of antisemitism, Trump has also threatened to withdraw federal funding from 60 colleges as a means of coercing universities into submission. In doing so, he has targeted faculty, students, and entire academic programs deemed incompatible with a white nationalist, Christian fundamentalist vision of education. This is not just an attack; it is an attempt to remake education as a tool of ideological indoctrination and authoritarian control. Disturbingly, a growing number of universities are capitulating to these demands, with Columbia University among those enabling them. Unfortunately, too many university presidents and academics remain silent, “refusing to make a firm public defense of democracy”—rendering themselves complicit in an educational model that bears an alarming resemblance to the historical precedents of Nazi Germany and the current reality of Orban’s Hungary.

Clearly the gravity of this moment demands more than the usual analyses of corruption and political overreach. What we are witnessing is not just the dismemberment of constitutional protections or the expansion of a violent state—it is domestic terrorism orchestrated from the highest levels of government. This is not simply the erosion of rights but the calculated deployment of fear, a homegrown machinery of repression that transforms governance into

an instrument of terror. It is a malignant legality, waging war on the American public under the guise of law and order, where power no longer merely punishes but seeks to invoke a living death on those it marks as enemies. The arrest of Khalil and others—both Jews and non-Jews—who stood in solidarity with Palestinian freedom, has been smeared as antisemitic violence. This framing blurs the line between state repression and the broader attack on critical thought itself. Under the Trump regime, thinking is viewed as a form of moral cowardice and as Umberto Eco insightfully observed in his critique of fascism, critical thinking is also smeared as a form of emasculation.

### **The Politics of Annihilation and Disappearance**

This is a politics of annihilation—one that does not always kill outright but keeps entire populations in a state of unrelenting precarity, caught between survival and disappearance. As Judith Butler warns, this is the logic of governance that “produces precarity, sustaining populations on the edge of death, sometimes killing its members, and sometimes not.” It is a form of slow violence, where existence itself is made tenuous, where immigrants, dissidents, the poor, and the racialized are left in a state of permanent vulnerability, their lives dictated not by the rule of law but by the whims of power.

Trump’s ceaseless torrent of lies, his relentless branding of dissidents as “terrorists,” “ Hamas supporters,” and “enemies from within,” along with his call for brutal retribution and the imprisoning of his foes—journalists, judges, politicians, and prosecutors—forms an insidious architecture of terror and lawlessness. This system is designed to silence, disappear, and annihilate those who resist. We must pause and reflect when Attorney General Bondi claims that a judge supports terrorism merely because he ruled against the Alien Enemy Act’s use for mass deportations. Or when, under the guise of a restraining government order, Dr. Rasha Alawieh—an esteemed Lebanese kidney transplant specialist and Brown University professor who holds a valid H-1B visa—was illegally deported. However, it is crucial to consider the racialized and religious context of this action. Dr. Alawieh, as a Muslim Arab woman, is not being targeted not for any criminal wrongdoing, but more than likely because of her identity.

The persecution of Khalil is not an isolated injustice but part of a broader, systemic pattern of state-sanctioned repression—one in which individuals of Muslim or Arab descent are disproportionately targeted, not for any crimes they have committed, but for who they are. As Jeffrey St. Clair aptly observes, Khalil is now facing deportation despite never having been charged with a crime. In reality, his only “offense” is daring to exercise his right to free

speech—denouncing, with moral clarity, what countless international organizations and human rights groups have recognized as Israel’s genocidal war against Palestinians.

This is precisely why authoritarian white nationalists like Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, and Stephen Miller have seized upon Khalil, transforming him into a high-profile political prisoner. Their attack on him is inseparable from their broader war on dissent, on youth resistance, and on the right to condemn state-sanctioned atrocities. Khalil’s crime in their eyes is not violence, nor extremism, nor any violation of law—it is his refusal to be silent in the face of the illegal and morally depraved slaughter of innocent women and children in Gaza by Netanyahu and his far-right government.

What unnerves Trump and his enforcers is that Khalil, like so many other young people, refuses to bow before their authoritarian rule. His activism stands in direct defiance of the ideology they seek to impose—an ideology that demands obedience, that criminalizes resistance, that seeks to erase the very possibility of solidarity between oppressed peoples. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Trump administration’s willingness to wield the full force of a lawless, punishing state to crush those who dare hold power accountable.

The government has branded Khalil a threat, falsely accusing him of siding with terrorists, of making Jewish-Americans “feel unsafe,” of aligning with Hamas. Yet, as St. Clair makes clear, Khalil’s statements on Israel are strikingly diplomatic, rooted in a vision of justice that recognizes the inextricable ties between Palestinian and Jewish liberation. St. Clair quotes Khalil to make this point clear.

“As a Palestinian student, I believe that the liberation of the Palestinian people and the Jewish people are intertwined and go hand in hand, and you cannot achieve one without the other.” He described the movement as one “for social justice and freedom and equality for everyone.” Khalil told CNN during an interview in 2024: “There is, of course, no place for antisemitism. What we are witnessing is anti-Palestinian sentiment that’s taking different forms and antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism [are] some of these forms.”

Khalil’s case is not just about him. It is about the Trump administration’s broader assault on democracy, on protest, on the very right to resist injustice. He has become a symbol of a state determined to silence its critics, a state that punishes the young for their refusal to submit to its dictates. And in that, he stands as both a warning and an inspiration. Because if Khalil’s persecution tells us anything, it is that the struggle for justice is far from over—and that those in power will wield every instrument of state violence to suppress it.

Yet his fate is not an isolated tragedy; it is a harbinger of a deeper, more insidious transformation—the descent into a lawless regime that openly defies the courts, weaponizes



ancient statutes like the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, and erases due process with impunity. Trump's brazen push to expel hundreds of Venezuelan immigrants, without legal justification, is not an anomaly; it is a template, a warning shot for a future in which dissent itself is criminalized, where anyone—Palestinian, immigrant, student, protester—can be branded a “terrorist” and exiled from the nation's conscience. As Norman Ornstein, no radical, warns with chilling precision: This is American Gestapo. But history has shown, time and again, that movements born in truth do not die under repression. They only grow stronger.

### **Weaponizing Terrorism**

Trump's tendency to label any dissent as terrorism is both absurd and dangerous. His words on the White House lawn, stating that people protesting at Tesla dealerships across the country “should be labeled domestic terrorists” illuminate this perfectly. Branding dissenters and anybody who is critical of the Trump administration as terrorists is a hallmark of fascism—not just a weapon against free speech, but a means of erasing their humanity. It casts them as evil, irredeemable, and a threat to be crushed, legitimizing state violence in the process. The reckless expansion of this charge is the mark of a state that mutilates bodies, justice, democracy, and the very notion of humanity itself.

This politics of deceit, lawlessness, abduction, and disappearance reveals the mechanisms of white supremacy at work by which people of color are rendered disposable. At loss here are not just political and legal rights, but the dispossession of bodies thrust into zones that accelerate the death of the unwanted in what Robert Jay Lifton has described as a “death-saturated age.” The danger here is not simply that Trump and his political officials criminalize opposition and eliminate free speech, but that they are laying the groundwork for horrors of the past, once thought unimaginable in the United States. These include: the widespread use of state-sanctioned violence, mass arrests, disappearances, death squads, and the slow, methodical erosion of any space where truth, justice, and dissent might still survive.

### **Conclusion**

To understand Trump's reign of terror, we must move beyond conventional political analysis. We must historicize it, trace its roots, expose the cultural forces that make it possible, and refuse to look away from the totality of his repression. The normalization of fascist politics in America is not just a function of law or policy—it is a war over meaning, over memory, agency, over the capacity to imagine a different future. What we are witnessing in the current historical moment is the final evolution of neoliberal violence with the appearance of a criminogenic state that criminalizes social problems and dissent, repackaging them as a war



on terrorism. Salvation comes with blind loyalty, the normalization of a politics of disposability, erasure, and the bold face emergence of a police state.

State engineered violence, cruelty, and rise of organized terror as the governing principle of the Trump regime is not a mere aberration; it is an intentional distortion of governance—a calculated shift in how the state wields power. This is a moment when state-engineered violence and cruelty are not just actions but guiding principles, tearing at the fabric of justice, and embedding terror into the very essence of what was once an unassailable democracy. This crisis—the systemic violation of civil rights, the suppression of free speech, and the targeting of political activism—must be understood as part of a historical rupture. It is part of what Nancy Fraser once called “a crisis of the social totality, one in which conscience, ethics, and politics are yoked together in a struggle to retain our collective humanity.”

Khalil’s story is not merely an anomaly—it is a stark warning. His suffering, like that of countless others, illuminates the brutal consequences of a society where those who challenge power, or who refuse to conform to the narrow confines of white Christian nationalism, find themselves not only stripped of citizenship and dignity, but disappear into the black hole of social and political abandonment. In an era overshadowed by rising totalitarian fascism, the very fabric of American society is being redefined by reactionary ideological closures that determine who is deemed worthy of belonging, who is silenced, and who is subjected to state violence. These actions are not random or isolated; they are part of a chilling, systemic effort to expunge history, destroy the capacity for critical thought, criminalize dissent, disappear the bodies and identities of those deemed ‘other’ by race, ethnicity, or religion.

This is the fascist machinery of control in motion—an apparatus designed to reshape the world in the image of those who hold power, leaving in its wake a landscape where justice is no longer governed by the rule of law, but by the dictates of global authoritarianism. It is the nightmare of a capitalism that has reached its terminal point, now ruling through terror, force, a reactionary culture, and a machinery of death. The promises of equality, social mobility, the redistribution of rights, and justice have crumbled, facing a legitimacy crisis and all but dead in their appeal. What remains is a brutal form of gangster capitalism, a technofascism where the ideologues of Trump and Musk boldly and unapologetically proclaim not merely that the U.S. has become a more recognizably authoritarian state, but that an endpoint has been reached where the U.S. if not the world “can belong only to a few.” This is no longer the promise of democracy, but its death knell.

Trump’s assault on civil rights, his war on free speech, and his crackdown on political activism do not mark the beginning of authoritarianism in America—they are its

continuation, its escalation. This playbook is not new. It echoes the brutal tactics of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and India, where dissent is silenced, resistance is rebranded as terrorism, and critics of the state disappear without consequence. What we are witnessing is the slow but deliberate dismantling of the legal and democratic guardrails that once restrained power.

Arwa Mahdawi's warning in *The Guardian* is both urgent and undeniable: "We are sliding toward an authoritarian future at alarming speed." But this is not some distant horizon. Repression is not creeping—it is here. Freedoms are not eroding—they are being stripped away in real time, before our very eyes. And as Mahdawi reminds us, "All of our freedoms are intertwined."

To defend one is to defend all. The fight for justice cannot be compartmentalized, parceled out to the persecuted few. When one of us is silenced, shackled, imprisoned, deported, or erased, it is not just a student, an activist, or an immigrant who suffers—it is democracy itself that is wounded. The struggle is not solitary; it is shared. The stakes are not theoretical or abstract; they are existential, lived, drenched in a painful assault on the body. Resistance is no longer an idea—it is an imperative. It is the fault line between democracy and tyranny, between freedom and subjugation, between life and death. Silence is complicity. Now is the time to rise. This is not a moment for half-measures or polite appeals—it is a battle that must be waged collectively by workers, educators, students, cultural workers, unions, minorities of color and class, and all those who refuse to live under the yoke of gangster capitalism and its brutal machinery of exploitation. This is not a plea for reform—it is a call for radical transformation, a decisive break from the obscene inequalities, entrenched power, and suffocating grip of financial elites. The future cannot be a mirror of an authoritarian present; it must be seized, forged in struggle, and built from the ruins of a system that has long served only the powerful. The shadows of fascism are thickening, spreading across the globe. We either resist—or we are consumed. The struggle against a capitalist future will be difficult, but there are no other options as the death march of fascism increasingly encircles the globe.

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*Resistance: Against Manufactured Ignorance (Bloomsbury 2022) and Insurrections: Education in the Age of Counter-Revolutionary Politics (Bloomsbury, 2023), and coauthored with Anthony DiMaggio, Fascism on Trial: Education and the Possibility of Democracy (Bloomsbury, 2025). Giroux is also a member of Truthout's board of directors.*

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