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March 21, 2025

The Honorable Marco Rubio  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio:

As organizations that work to protect the operating environment for civil society, we, the undersigned, are deeply concerned about the [detention and attempted deportation](#) of Mahmoud Khalil.

Mahmoud Khalil should never have been detained.

On Mar. 14, 2025, [103 Members of Congress signed a letter](#) to you and Secretary of Homeland Security Noem saying as much. A [legal permanent resident](#) of the United States, Khalil is being targeted with intentionally vague and unsubstantiated claims that he “[led activities aligned to Hamas, a designated terrorist organization](#)”. Although no criminal charges or allegations of unlawful conduct have been made, the language around his detention draws heavily from counter-terrorism narratives. Beyond invoking this harmful language, Khalil’s actual removal comes under [Section 237 \(a\)\(4\)\(C\)\(i\)](#) of the [Immigration and Nationality Act](#) (INA) — a [rarely used](#), discretionary provision that permits deportation when the Secretary of State believes an individual’s presence has “[potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States](#).”

This statute offers no clear standard or process, allowing for the deprivation of rights based on opaque, often undisclosed determinations. [Legal experts](#) have raised concerns that the statute is [unconstitutionally vague](#). By invoking Section 237 (a)(4)(C)(i) while relying on counter-terrorism rhetoric [in the media](#), the administration is attempting to justify deportation without a criminal or evidentiary basis. This decision is deeply concerning because it signals that both expansive counter-terrorism narratives and immigration enforcement are being weaponized to meet the same punitive ends — without alleging any unlawful conduct. This further lowers the already low bar for civil society actors, especially those advocating for Palestinian rights, to be cast as a security threat.

Khalil's case is a political decision cloaked in the language of counter-terrorism with the intent to stifle protest. We are concerned that in your [capacity](#) as Secretary of State and in Troy Edgar's [capacity](#) as Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, this language has been invoked to justify retributive action against an anti-war and pro-Palestinian advocate. This tactic is part of a broader pattern of expanding state power to [criminalize dissent and advocacy](#) — [particularly on Palestine](#) — to shrink civic space and frame civil society actors as dangerous.

Khalil's case intensifies the already-hostile environment for nonprofit organizations and human rights defenders (HRDs). Many currently face [financial de-risking](#), [legislative restrictions](#), and [surveillance](#) for their work. The effort to now prosecute and remove someone on the basis of activism deemed politically inconvenient sends a message that even lawful, constitutionally protected advocacy and speech may be grounds for state retaliation. That message will reverberate across immigrant communities, Muslim communities, Arab communities, and the broader ecosystem of organizations working to end the [humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza](#). And it will not stop there. This will also have a chilling effect on student-led activism and human rights defense on campuses, particularly by non-citizens. Many of their institutions are not only [failing to protect them](#), but are also [collaborating](#) with local, state and federal law enforcement to arrest and deport them — often [through violent means](#). This chilling effect is precisely the point. The Trump administration seeks to silence those who take pro-peace and pro-humanitarian stances on Palestine, with a further intent to scare advocates, civil society actors, and HRDs writ large into silencing themselves.

And while Khalil's legal permanent residency is not the core issue of this letter, it deeply matters. The discretionary use of immigration enforcement in this case reveals just how easily the tools of state power can be weaponized, under the guise of foreign policy, against individuals based on purported political threat. *This is how civic space shrinks and authoritarianism grows* — not with sweeping new laws, but with selective, strategic, and politicized targeting that send a warning across movements and society at large.

Civil society must be free to operate without fear. This case makes clear how the invocation of counter-terrorism narratives can be deployed to dismantle that freedom — eroding democratic space, delegitimizing humanitarian work, and placing entire communities under threat. We stand firmly in solidarity with Mahmoud Khalil and all HRDs who are targeted on account of lawful speech and assembly.

The Charity & Security Network condemns the Trump Administration's deployment of counter-terrorism rhetoric and immigration provisions in Mahmoud Khalil's case. We call upon the Secretary of State to cease utilizing these measures for political gain and expediency, and to create a safe and enabling operating environment for civil society actors, students, and HRDs.

Please find a list of signatories below.

Sincerely,

350 New Orleans  
ActionAid USA  
Adalah Justice Project  
American Friends Service Committee  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta  
Center for Constitutional Rights  
Charity & Security Network  
CODEPINK  
DAWN  
Defending Rights & Dissent  
Dignidad/The Right to Immigration Institute  
Direct Action Everywhere  
Endangered Species Coalition  
Fridays For Future NYC  
Friends of the Earth U.S.  
Generation Common Good  
Grassroots International  
Hindus for Human Rights  
Indivisible East Bay  
Jewish Voice for Peace Action  
Muslim Advocates  
Muslim Legal Fund of America (MLFA)  
Muslim Public Affairs Council  
Muslims for Just Futures  
Nonviolent Peaceforce  
Oil & Gas Action Network  
Oil Change International  
Partnership for Civil Justice Fund  
Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans (PANA)  
Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania  
Putnam Progressives  
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)  
Shoulder to Shoulder  
The International Corporate Accountability Roundtable  
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
United Church of Christ  
Vessel Project of Louisiana