

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

MAHMOUD KHALIL'S WARNING: AMERICAN ANTI-FASCISTS ARE FAILING THE PALESTINE TEST

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LAURA FLANDERS: Perhaps you've heard of the "Palestine Exception." That's the idea that all sorts of behaviors and speech that are acceptable in other contexts are selectively denied and punished when it comes to advocacy around Palestine. Well, what if the treatment of Palestinians wasn't an exception, but rather a stress test? A test of our tolerance as a nation and as a people, for cruelty and the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Go down the list that we have heard from every fascism scholar we've had on this program, and what do they say authoritarians do? They name an enemy, declare an emergency. And on that pretext, invoke extraordinary, often military powers to shock and intimidate every credible source of opposition and dissent, including politicians, the law, the media, the academy, free speech, and even the truth itself. Our guest today has seen every one of those steps up close. A negotiator for the massive pro-Palestine student protests on Columbia University's campus in 2024, Mahmoud Khalil was arrested without a warrant by unidentified men in March. He was in fact, one of the first and most visible abductions after the second Trump administration took office. Khalil was taken from his pregnant wife and transported 1,500 miles away to a Louisiana detention camp without access to a lawyer or any means of defense. A legal permanent resident who had committed no violence and broken no law, the Trump administration sought to expel Khalil not for his acts, but for his quote, "beliefs, statements, and associations," which Secretary of State Marco Rubio wrote in a short letter, would quote, "compromise a compelling US foreign policy interest," quote. 100 some days later after he had missed the birth of his son, Deen, a New Jersey federal judge rejected Rubio's case and ordered Mahmoud Khalil released. But this September, the administration came back now citing errors on his Green Card application and ordered Khalil to be deported, possibly to Algeria or Syria where his life would be under threat. He has until the end of October to appeal. In the meantime, Khalil is suing the Trump administration for \$20 million in damages, alleging that he was falsely imprisoned, maliciously prosecuted, and smeared as an anti-Semite. And we as a nation are seeing threats to free speech, assembly, migration, and academic freedom spread and spread and spread. Khalil is just 30. He was born in a refugee camp in Syria after the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the land claimed by Israel in 1948. He fled Syria for Lebanon in 2013 after joining protests against then President Bashar al-Assad and came to Columbia University to pursue a master's degree in 2022. Khalil has said he will continue advocating for Palestinians as his legal battle plays out, and that is exactly what he is doing. It is my great honor, privilege, and pleasure to welcome Mahmoud Khalil to "Laura Flanders & Friends." Thanks for joining us.

MAHMOUD KHALIL: Well, thank you so much, Laura, for having me. It's really a pleasure for me to be here with you.

LAURA FLANDERS: I've got to begin by asking how your family are. How is baby Deen and your wife, Noor? She's been through a lot.

MAHMOUD KHALIL: We're doing very well, taking it day by day. You know, Noor went through a lot, especially during her late months of pregnancy and early days of a newborn. So now we're just, yeah, making up for these days that were taken from us. And Deen turns five months just two days ago. So he is at this very precious time now.

LAURA FLANDERS: I guess I start by asking about your people, but the next thing I want to ask you about is your place and Palestine, and not the Palestine of the war and the misery that we're seeing this minute, but the Palestine of your grandmother's stories, perhaps. Like what does that Palestine to you in your heart, on your mind, what picture perhaps does that summon?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: As a country for everyone. A country that treats all its people in equality and dignity, giving them the same freedoms. Not depending on who they are or their religion. Just like, you know, you're a citizen of this country. You have the full rights and responsibilities, and this is what I am fighting for right now. I'm fighting for a country that would treat everyone equally without apartheid, without occupation, without violence.

LAURA FLANDERS: Did your grandmother tell you stories?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: Yeah, she did. I mean, my grandmother was my primary source about life in Palestine. Growing up in the refugee camp, I can see in her eyes the misery and sort of like just the longing for Palestine, for that life where she had her own house. She had her own land and everyone around her just living in peace. And I've mentioned that before, but she had like Jewish neighbors and she would sometimes go and work in their farms as well. And at no point she meant, she, I felt any sort of, I would say anger or anonymity against like, you know, like her Jewish neighbors at all. And this is, I believe what she was struggling with that why now she lives less than 40 miles away from her hometown, from the village in a tent, or later a mud house with no property whatsoever.

LAURA FLANDERS: Concretely, how did you get connected with the movement that you became a negotiator for there on the Columbia University campus?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: Being a Palestinian already connected to the movement of liberation of your people. And that in Columbia in specific I was one of the very few Palestinian students on

campus, especially those coming directly from a refugee camp or from Palestine. I mean, since I left Syria, I had also this sense of a humanity and so in terms of like, I want to find justice. I want to seek justice and dignity. So I started working with Syrians and Palestinians, Syrian refugees in Lebanon and across the region and came here, continued to do that.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you get involved and we've seen some of what happened in the film, "[The Encampments](#)" that we featured on this program in the past. People can check that out. What we don't know is your story of March 8th. International Women's Day for some, but for others, the day on which you were, there's no other word for it, abducted. What happened?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: So following my, I would say involvement in the encampment in April 2024, there was a very, I would say, concerted effort to doxx me and smear me online by many shady groups, but also by Zionist actors at Columbia University. But I sort of did not care about that because, you know, these smear campaigns were designed to intimidate you so you don't speak. However, when Trump came into power, these threats became institutionalized. Like this anti-Palestinian sentiment has become institutionalized in a way that the federal government was depending on these shady groups to get information and to target pro-Palestine advocacy. Yet I was, to be honest, like I was confident, you know, nothing would happen to me. I never did anything wrong. I literally was protesting a genocide. I was in my university protesting against the use of my tuition dollars to be invested in Israel. So there's nothing wrong about that. And then March 8th comes, I was on my way back from a dinner, an Iftar dinner with my wife and it was a Saturday night. So, you know, like we're looking forward to just go home, have a cup of tea. Noor was eight months pregnant at that time. And yeah, that's it. And then we're surprised, as you said, I was followed by plain-clothed agents and unmarked cars come and just telling me like, "You need to come with us." I ask, you know, because here you think you have rights. So I asked like, "Oh, first, can I see your ID? But second, do you have an arrest warrant?" And they declined to show me these. And you know, at first they said, "Your visa has been revoked." I was like, you know, "I don't have a visa. I'm a permanent resident in this country." And they can see them like shocked that I told them that I'm a permanent resident. The last thing I heard before being arrested or while being arrested was them threatening Noor, my wife, of arrest if she doesn't leave me. And then when I was being booked, the last thing I heard that the White House is requesting an update. So imagine being in these circumstances where I was like, "What? Like what's happening?"

LAURA FLANDERS: Were you in shackles at that time? Did I get that right?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: Yes, so I was in shackles, basically during these like first 30 hours, for most of the time when being transported from one place to another.

LAURA FLANDERS: And any call to a lawyer, any call to anybody?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: Nothing. Despite my repeated request to call a lawyer, to call my wife, I did like, you know, and which is like the bare minimum, like as someone, I studied public administration and public policy, so I understand the law very well, to a good degree at least. Yeah, they refused to do any of that as if they are acting extrajudicially. And I felt it. I felt that maybe I'm being kidnapped, especially when, you know, I was shackled, being driven in the woods of Louisiana for over an hour and being transported from one car to another. That was like, you know, like, what's happening? Because I felt like really that what's happening to me was like, maybe I would be killed now, you know. Like I don't know where I am.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, and I'm just thinking you fled Syria for fear of exactly this kind of treatment.

MAHMOUD KHALIL: Exactly, exactly.

LAURA FLANDERS: And came to the US expecting different and better. Now it took a little while, but eventually Marco Rubio, Secretary of State releases this short letter claiming that your beliefs, opinions, and associations pose some kind of threat.

MAHMOUD KHALIL: But he said something there that's really alarming. He said, my beliefs, activities, associations, otherwise lawful. Like he concedes that these are lawful acts. These are lawful associations. So in the same letter he concedes that what I'm doing is lawful, but despite that, "I want to deport you because, you know, I see this as a foreign policy threat and compelling national security threat," which is absurd. Like at so many levels. And rightly, a federal judge ruled that there will be determination, or this letter in specific was unconstitutional. The government is appealing that now in the appellate court. But it's clear, like I think the government realized that they can't win on that case. Now they fabricated a whole new case that I made some willful misrepresentation on my Green Card application when I applied there. And it's merely like utterly, to be honest, like I would say disgusting that they are resorting to such tactics, fascist tactics, like literally fabricating a whole case. I wasn't even asked about these allegations in my court hearing, in my immigration court hearing. And this is something that I believe the American public does not know very well is that immigration courts are not actual courts, are not, you know, Article III courts or like independent, I would say. They belong or they report to the executive branch. They report to the Department of Justice and the attorney general. So the immigration judge in that case basically did not look at the case and they just wanted to find me deportable. And this is what happened now. And we're still also like, we're challenging that because it's clear it is in retaliation of my First Amendment rights in this country.

LAURA FLANDERS: In the meantime, we've seen other people abducted, we've also seen the language ratchet up in this country. Most recently, Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, Donald

Trump's deputy chief of staff described the Democratic party as not a party, but a domestic extremist group. Do you think my suggestion that this so-called exception is actually a test of our acceptance of authoritarian or fascist rule holds?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: The administration was not trying to hide any of that. They said that my case would be used as a blueprint, as a test case to go after everyone who, they don't like their speech. And this is happening now, with Jimmy Kimmel or any of that. This has been happening to Palestinians and to pro-Palestine speech in this country for a number of years. And as you said, rightly in your introduction, this government thrives on division. And this is why the Trump administration are using. Like Palestine, they are using like the pretext of antisemitism and combating antisemitism to go after us because they know that this is the weakness of the Democratic party. And you know, when they go to the universities, they start with combating antisemitism, but then the second ask would be to abolish all DEI programs to sanitize the history on slavery and the inception of America. And the list goes on and on and on.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'd like to hear what you've learned about how we could combat some of this weakness, come together over issues that make a lot of people uncomfortable. I mean, this October 7th, we're going to see a lot of discomfort over what happened and different experiences and people feeling their lives, their families, their own stories under threat. What have you learned? What can you teach us? You are at this point, I think are an expert.

MAHMOUD KHALIL: The injustices that's happening right now by this administration that's trying to dismantle American institutions, American values, human rights, international humanitarian law, they're trying to dismantle all of that. And unity is the approach, and unity in a way that's a rights-based approach. The right of people to live, you know, equally in freedom and dignity. And unless literally the people wake up, like, I think now, the problem is a lot of people got so used to Trump and they say like with every action, they would say, "Oh, that's just like Trump. You know, that's just another thing Trump is doing." But I think people mistakenly think that what's happening is far from their doors. They think that this would never happen to them, whether, you know, because of their social status, because of their ethnicity or on any of that. But what's happening around us, like should alarm us that this is at our door, it's in our house. And it's not about that the US is becoming authoritarian. [It is authoritarianism now](#). Like I lived under Assad regime. I know how that feels. And we can see, I can see the same, the same attitudes around me, wherever I go with whomever I talk to. So we literally live now in authoritarianism.

LAURA FLANDERS: That hasn't stopped you fighting back. You have brought a civil lawsuit. What's the status of that right now?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: So now, you know, like the legal system takes a long time in this country. So we'll file the federal case very soon to take the administration to the federal court.

And this is about accountability because to me, silence is not an option. I know if I'm silent, that wouldn't really vindicate me or wouldn't make my case any better. And they would still come after me and after anyone else. And the cost or the moral cost of remaining silent is much higher than, you know, any of these costs that may happen to me or happening to me right now. And they will continue to seek accountability, whether through this lawsuit, but also, I go frequently to Congress now, like just to lobby and advocate not only for my case, it's for the stop of the war, but also like raising the alarm about what's happening now around us.

LAURA FLANDERS: There are some heroic resistors, especially among young people who would be subject to the draft in Israel, to serve in the so-called Israeli Defense Force. Increasingly, we're hearing their voices, they're speaking up. There are some others inside Israel who see in their own leader a similar kind of fascist authoritarian who has his own self-interested reasons to stay in power and is as unresponsive to any sanction by international law. What's your thought or your message to those people inside Israel and those who are close to them?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: I mean, there's absolutely no excuse to serve in an army that's committing a genocide. So I absolutely applaud those who are, you know, resisting being part of such a genocidal army, a genocidal state at this point. And to me, as I said it before, our liberation is mutual. [Our liberation is intertwined](#). You can never achieve Israel security without giving the Palestinians their full rights and vice versa. So this is why I believe in our collective liberation. And my liberation shouldn't come at the expense of anyone's liberation. And vice versa. Like I don't expect, you know, Zionism could be a noble ideology of creating a home for the Jewish people. But when that comes at the expense of my people, here's the problem. So similarly, I want to be able to realize my self-determination, respect others self-determination and just, you know, like live in dignity, freedom, and justice, prosperity.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is there anything you would've done different in the last few years, given how this has played out? And I guess one last question is, would you recommend to other young people like yourself to come to this country anymore? I'm glad you came, but I think we're losing lots of talent.

MAHMOUD KHALIL: So answering your first question, I mean, you know, you can always communicate better. You could have, you can always done things differently, but the core thing which is opposing a genocide and advocating for the right of your people to be free. I wouldn't have changed that. And once again, I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't do anything immoral or unlawful. So that's the thing. And regarding your second question, I mean, it's difficult, the state of the United States right now and the rights here, it's very difficult. And this is why I'm fighting. This is why. Because I want to be able to raise my child, my children, in a country that respects them and respect others. So this is why I'm doing it to be honest. I'm very hopeful of, with, in the new generation. The new generation who's seeing, you know, this genocide unfolding in front of

their eyes and refusing to remain silent despite all the opposition, despite all the oppression against them. Like the students at Columbia, 17, 18, 19 years old who are risking their degrees, their futures, everything to speak out for the truth, to speak out for human rights. That's what keeps me hopeful and what's actually now, keeps me like fighting.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you see a path to that future? Like what do we do?

MAHMOUD KHALIL: There is, there's absolutely a path. And when there's a will, there's a way. I absolutely believe in that. Despite how this administration and the establishment, those in power want us to think that we are useless, we are hopeless and we don't have a chance. No, I absolutely believe we do have. That's why we need to keep fighting.

LAURA FLANDERS: Keep up the great work. Thank you.

MAHMOUD KHALIL: Thank you so much, Laura, for having me and for having this space.

LAURA FLANDERS: We like to celebrate courage on this program. And there's no question, Mahmoud Khalil and his wife, Noor, have shown a lot of it, but they'd be the first to say they're not alone. Just look at the students and faculty and staff on college campuses and to the professional organizations that have gone to bat for them. Federal judges too have been standing up and speaking out. Most recently, a Massachusetts judge handed down a blistering decision on behalf of Khalil and other plaintiffs, rebuking the administration for using the threat of what he called ideological deportation to silence people's views, specifically their views on Palestine. It all bodes well for Khalil's future legal challenges, say his legal team. But I've been thinking a lot about what he said about authoritarianism at our doorstep. Donald Trump and Pete Hegseth did a lot to bring it over the threshold, it seems to me when they said to the top brass of our country's military that they should think of our cities as training grounds. For what? Deportation? Occupation? It makes you think long and hard about that experience of Palestinians. And there's another thing I think about too. M. Gessen's comments on our show where the point was made that the window is open now. Our window is open now, but it may be closing. What will we do in this moment? Well, that's the question. You can find my full, uncut conversation with Mahmoud Khalil and there is a lot in it through subscribing to our free podcast. You can do that at our website. And please consider supporting this independent program. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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