

## Mahmoud Khalil's "Letter to Columbia" from jail

**Editor's Note: This op-ed was dictated by Mahmoud Khalil and published by the Columbia Spectator**

To Columbia—an institution that laid the groundwork for my abduction—and to its student body, who must not abdicate their responsibility to resist repression,

Since my abduction on March 8, the intimidation and kidnapping of international students who stand for Palestine has only accelerated. On March 9, Yunseo Chung had to file a lawsuit and eventually seek a court order barring U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement from detaining her for her protest activity. On March 11, Ranjani Srinivasan chose to cross the border to Canada upon the belief that this university was ready to hand her over to ICE. Beyond the gates of Columbia, Leqaa Kordia, Dr. Badar Khan Suri, and Rümeyssa Öztürk have all been snatched by the state. The situation is oddly reminiscent of when I fled the brutality of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and sought refuge in Lebanon. **Click here for full letter**

The logic used by the federal government to target myself and my peers is a direct extension of Columbia's repression playbook concerning Palestine.

In the 18 months since the genocidal campaign in Gaza began, Columbia has not only refused to acknowledge the lives of Palestinians sacrificed for Zionist settler colonialism, but it has actively reproduced the language used to justify this killing. You received countless emails from former University President Minouche Shafik, former interim University President Katrina Armstrong, and the deans of your schools that manufactured public hysteria about antisemitism without once mentioning the tens of thousands of Palestinians murdered under bombs made of your dollars.

Columbia has suppressed student dissent under the auspices of combating antisemitism. Last year, Columbia turned over student disciplinary records to Congress and created the Task Force on Antisemitism that broadly categorized anti-Israel sentiment as hate speech to condemn protests. Around the beginning of Armstrong's tenure, Columbia created the Office of Institutional Equity, providing senior administration members with unilateral control over the "review and arbitration of all reports of discrimination and discriminatory harassment at Columbia," effectively diminishing the power of the University Judicial Board, an appointed panel of students, faculty, and staff, whose role it is to hear "all charges of violations of" the Rules of University Conduct. Supposedly responsible for overseeing cases of Title VI, VII, and IX violations, OIE instead became a mechanism to persecute pro-Palestinian students with no due process. Even the contents of this letter, absurdly, could be presented as sufficient to be reported to OIE.

The movement for Palestinian freedom and justice at Columbia and across the United States has always centered community care. Hundreds of you joined the encampment

last spring. Since then, many of you have stayed involved in the movement. Together, you organized mutual aid for families in Gaza through bake sales and funding campaigns. You created study spaces, reading circles, and cross-movement solidarity. This movement has always been grassroots. It was led by students—many younger than me—who risked their careers, their degrees, and their futures to demand divestment. Anyone who has truly engaged with the movement knows that claims that its goals and purpose are rooted in antisemitism are mere fabrication.

In a cruel irony, the students who publicize manufactured safety concerns regarding antisemitism are the same ones who repeatedly show up at your events looking for provocation, leaving only disappointed. Some of your classmates work with faculty to run doxxing platforms, submit our names to websites and groups like Canary Mission and Betar, and turn our lives into targets. While they sit comfortably behind their screens, their actions have very real consequences for the rest of us. If I am deprived of my child in the first moments of his life, the people responsible will have been, among others, these students.

Especially in light of the dual degree program with Tel Aviv University, I can't help but think that if I were in Palestine, some of these students would be the ones stopping me at checkpoints, raiding my university, piloting the drones surveilling my community, or killing my neighbors in their homes. While students were building solidarity at Columbia, some pro-Israel students were participating in the genocide as military personnel during their school breaks, only to return to campus and claim victimhood in the classroom.

These students who have smeared and attacked us have also benefited from the mutual backing of this institution and the federal government. Unable to build a movement supported by their peers, these students met instead with right-wing members of Congress to pressure a University crackdown. Abandoning all pretenses of neutrality, University Provost Angela Olinto and Armstrong also convened with the Israeli minister of education. Together, both coalitions pushed the weight of the federal government down on students.

I ask you, who is truly at risk here?

To the students who remain apathetic to Columbia's disregard for human life and its willingness to discard student safety: As pressure from the federal government intensifies, know that your neutrality on Palestine will not protect you. When the time comes for the federal government to target other causes, it will be your names that Columbia will offer on a silver platter, it will be your pleas that fall on deaf ears, it will be your just causes that are stonewalled.

This institution's singular concern has always been the vitality of its financial profile, not the safety of Jewish students. This is why Columbia was all too happy to embrace a superficial progressive agenda while still disregarding Palestine, and this is why it will soon turn on you, too.

This has been made clear most recently through the deputization of Public Safety officers to arrest students, the presence of New York Police Department officers and Department of Homeland Security agents on and around campus, the increasing use of surveillance technology, and the McCarthyist and racist interventions at the Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African studies department. This institution has systematically gutted every value it claims to uphold all so that it may better function as an arm of the state.

If there was any illusion left, it shattered last week when the board of trustees executed a historic maneuver to seize direct control of the presidency. Cutting out their middleman, the board appointed fellow trustee Claire Shipman to a position reserved for academic leadership. Who can still pretend this is an educational institution and not the “Vichy on the Hudson”?

Faced with a movement for divestment they couldn’t crush, your trustees opted to set fire to the institution they’re entrusted with. It is incumbent upon each of you to reclaim the University and join the student movement to carry forward the work of the past year.

To members of Columbia’s faculty who pat themselves on the back for their progressive leanings but are content to limit their participation to performative statements: What will it take for you to resist the destruction of your University? Are your positions worth more than the lives of your students and the integrity of your work?

In his last message to a world that betrayed him, the beloved Palestinian journalist Hossam Shabat said, “I did all this because I believe in the Palestinian cause. I believe this land is ours, and it has been the highest honor of my life to die defending it and serving its people.”

So too do we believe that it is the highest honor of our lives to struggle for the cause of Palestinian liberation. The student movement will continue to carry the mantle of a free Palestine. History will redeem us, while those who were content to wait on the sidelines will be forever remembered for their silence.