

KHALIL V. THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

Ending the Conspiracy to Suppress the Palestinian Freedom Movement

SUMMARY & FAQs

OVERVIEW:

Mahmoud Khalil, a recent Columbia University graduate and legal permanent resident, has sued senior Trump administration officials and private anti-Palestinian groups for conspiring to target, detain, and attempt to deport him because of his identity and his advocacy for Palestinian rights. The lawsuit argues that government officials and private actors, including the Heritage Foundation, Betar and Canary Mission, violated the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 and the Constitution when they coordinated to suppress political speech in support of Palestinian rights through the weaponization of immigration enforcement and baseless, pretextual accusations of “terrorism” and “antisemitism.”

Mahmoud’s arrest, detention, and attempted deportation were part of a broader strategy to criminalize solidarity, chill speech, and make an example of those who speak out against the subjugation of Palestinians. This case is about more than one person or one freedom movement; **it is about whether government power can be weaponized by private actors to target human rights defenders and strip people of their constitutional rights.**

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- **The case exposes a conspiracy between several private anti-Palestinian organizations and senior members of the Trump administration:** The defendants include the Heritage Foundation, and Victoria Coates and Robert Greenway, the lead authors of “Project Esther”, Betar and its leaders, Canary Mission and its leaders and agent, as well as senior Presidential advisor Stephen Miller, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of Homeland Security Markwayne Mullin, Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, former Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs John Armstrong.
- **This was a conspiracy motivated by anti-Palestinian animus to silence Palestinian advocacy:** Khalil was targeted because of his Palestinian identity and his public advocacy for Palestinian freedom.
- **Conspiracies between the government and private actors to violate Constitutional rights are illegal (and not new):** The case is brought under the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 (42 U.S.C. § 1985(3)), a Reconstruction-era statute enacted in response to racialized violence against Black people, that the Klan was perpetrating in order to terrorize and repress the burgeoning movement for Black civil rights.
- **The tactics are authoritarian:** The case exposes how “terrorism” frameworks, deportation threats, politicized enforcement and private blacklisting are used to bypass due process and silence advocacy against the subjugation of a people, and to expand state repression against marginalized communities and human rights defenders.
- **Solidarity is the answer:** This attack is meant to isolate Palestinians, scare others away from supporting them, and signal to other social justice movements the lengths the administration is willing to go to silence them. The response must be solidarity, not retreat.

For more information, see our case page: [Khalil v. The Heritage Foundation](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who is Mahmoud Khalil?

Mahmoud Khalil is a Palestinian refugee, lawful permanent resident of the United States, husband and father of U.S. citizens. He became active in student organizing against Columbia's complicity in Israel's genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. As per a blueprint laid out by Heritage Foundation in Project Esther, private anti-Palestinian targeted Khalil for arrest and deportation as part of an explicit strategy to dismantle the burgeoning Palestine solidarity movement, and senior federal officials then acted on that targeting. On March 8, 2025, Khalil was detained for 104 days in Louisiana, 1,300 miles from his pregnant wife. He missed the birth of his first child before a federal judge found his detention presumptively unconstitutional and ordered him released on bail.

Who are the private defendants?

- **The Heritage Foundation** is a not-for-profit organization based in Washington D.C. and the architect of Project 2025, which aims to reshape the federal government and oppose racial justice, immigrant's rights, reproductive rights, and LGBTQIA+ rights. The Heritage Foundation also authored "Project Esther" described below.
- **Betar** is a not-for-profit organization in Israel with two U.S.-based affiliates. Betar advocates for exclusive or superior rights for Jewish people, and territorial expansion into ancestral Palestinian and Jordanian land. Betar surveilled and selected the individuals who would be the targets of the conspiracy.
- **Canary Mission** is an anonymously-run blacklisting, cyberstalking, and doxxing entity that publishes the personal information of individuals and organizations critical of Israel and its policies. Canary Mission also surveilled and selected the individuals who would be the targets of the conspiracy.

What is "Project Esther," and why does it matter?

Project Esther is a Heritage Foundation plan, published on October 7, 2024, that called for a "public-private partnership" to harass and punish Palestinians and their supporters once "a willing Administration" took office. It was a blueprint for the conspiracy that this lawsuit challenges, and described a range of tactics including arrest, imprisonment, deportation, criminal prosecution, meritless litigation, and defunding. Once the Trump administration took power, federal officials and private groups began carrying out that plan in coordination.

What rights were violated?

The defendants targeted Khalil because he is Palestinian and because he advocated for Palestinian human rights, violating his rights to free speech, protest, assembly, association, equality and non-discrimination, travel, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention.

What can I do?

Solidarity is the strategy. Defending Palestinian freedom advocacy today is essential to protecting everyone's right to dissent tomorrow. This lawsuit is both a fight for accountability for Mahmoud Khalil and a broader challenge to the use of state power, private intimidation, and counterterrorism frameworks to suppress movements for justice.

[Take action now](#) by demanding that your member of Congress call on the Trump administration to terminate all removal proceedings against Mahmoud!