

POLITICS 16 HOURS AGO

## Trump's Secret Police Are Stalking More and More Students

*Scholars targeted by ICE are suing to fight deportation—and halt Trump's war on the First Amendment.*

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**Mother Jones illustration; Photos courtesy of attorneys for Momodou Taal and Rumeysa Ozturk; Bonnie Cash/Pool/CNP/Zuma**

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**On Tuesday afternoon**, a federal judge in New York's Northern District heard opening arguments in the case of *Momodou Taal v. Trump*. Neither party was present in the courtroom—in large part because Trump's Department of Homeland Security has been trying to find Taal for days, reportedly staking out his home and entering his university's campus.

Taal, a British-Gambian doctoral student at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, sued the administration on February 15 to challenge Trump's executive orders curtailing free speech and seeking to deport pro-Palestinian activists, which have been paired with a wave of attacks by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers—in some cases masked and hooded—on graduate and undergraduate students.

At 12:52 a.m. on Friday—within five days of Taal's lawsuit—Taal's lawyers received an email “inviting” their client to “surrender to ICE custody.” At 7:00 p.m. the following day, Trump's lawyers filed a brief informing Taal that the State Department had already revoked his visa, without his knowledge, on March 14—the day *before* Taal filed his lawsuit. Days later, ICE agents arrived on Cornell's campus attempting to find and seize him.

Over the past two weeks, the Trump administration has targeted at least eight foreign academics in America for deportation, often sending officers to snatch them off the street or in their homes, retroactively changing what they're charged with, and shipping them halfway across the country, far from their families lawyers—increasingly in apparent defiance of court orders against their rendition. Members of the commentariat like venture capitalist Paul Graham have mused that “the students ICE is disappearing seem such a random selection.”

But experts and people close to the cases say it's not random at all. The scholars in question are immigrant academics—Gambian, Palestinian, Korean, and Turkish—targeted for pro-Palestinian social media posts, op-eds, and participation in last year's campus-based opposition to the continuing slaughter in Gaza.

**Momodou Taal knew** this was coming for months. “Given my public exposure, if he were to deport student protesters, I think I would be at the top of the list as a target,” he told *Mother Jones* in January. But, Taal said in a recent *Intercept* podcast appearance, his personal stakes pale in comparison to those of Palestinians in Gaza, where the number of known dead has passed 50,000—as the US continues shipping bombs and warplanes to Israel, and as Israeli officials threaten a full-scale military takeover of the territory, “I know it's a very frightening moment,” Taal said in that *Intercept* appearance, “but for me, this is the time to double down.”

Taal's lawsuit, filed with fellow Cornell doctoral student Sriram Parasuram and Mukoma Wa Ngũgĩ, a Cornell literature professor, asserts that Trump's late January executive orders cracking down on campus speech violate both Taal's right to political expression and the rights of those around him to hear it.

“It's quite calculated and deliberate,” Taal told me on Thursday.

***Suing the president “is the only form of redress many of us have, in this moment, as a form of protection.”***

ICE agents, usually plainclothed and sometimes masked, are accosting students in the streets, using what even former House Rep. Ron Paul calls “Gestapo” tactics.

Trump's executive orders conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism, Taal said, have “clearly placed a target upon many people's

backs.” Taal recommends that students in his situation “lawyer up”—because the Trump administration, he said, is not acting alone: right-wing groups such as Canary Mission, an online doxxing platform that collects the personal information of anti-Zionist students and professors, have claimed credit for some students' detentions.

Suing the president, Taal said, “is the only form of redress many of us have, in this moment, as a form of protection.” Yunseo Chung, a Korean undergraduate at Columbia University who has been a legal permanent resident of the US since she was seven years old, filed suit on Monday for a temporary restraining order to prevent her deportation. Her case went to court on the same day as Taal's, and her order was quickly granted; Taal's own request for a temporary restraining order was denied by a New Jersey judge a day after it was filed.

“I think the stakes in all these cases are the same,” said Abed Ayoub, the executive director of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), whose lawyers are representing Taal. While each case has its nuances—some students have been detained, others have not; some are on green cards, others on visas—“what we're seeing is an attack on the First Amendment rights of folks in this country to express themselves,” Ayoub said.

Chung's suit accuses the Trump administration of a “larger pattern of attempted US government repression of constitutionally protected protest activity and other forms of speech,” and asserts that the federal government aims to “retaliate against and punish noncitizens like Ms. Chung for their participation in protests.” Taal's asserts that Trump's executive orders prohibit noncitizens from “engaging in constitutionally protected speech” that the Trump administration “may subjectively interpret as expressing a ‘hostile attitude’ to its interests by deploying the threat of deportation.

That threat, Taal says, casts a frighteningly broad net. “It's important that people recognize that it could be anyone, and that they need to rise up, and escalate, and refuse this to be normalized,” Taal said Thursday.

**Chung and Taal are now** two of many. Mahmoud Khalil, a legal permanent resident of Palestinian nationality, and a Columbia graduate student until December of last year, is also suing the president for the right to have his immigration case heard near his home in New York; he was arrested by ICE at his Manhattan residence on March 8 and, after initially being imprisoned in a New Jersey immigration detention facility, was remanded to an ICE “processing center” in Louisiana, where he is still being held. His fellow Columbia graduate student, Ranjani Srinivasan, fled the US for India on March 11 after ICE came knocking at her door. International students and professors Badar Khan Suri of Georgetown University in Washington, DC, Rasha Alawieh of Brown University in Rhode Island, Alireza Doroudi of the University of Alabama (who has not publicly engaged in pro-Palestine activism), and Rumeysa Ozturk of Tufts University in Massachusetts have also been seized in the past two weeks.

Chilling footage of Ozturk’s arrest swept the internet Thursday: six masked individuals in civilian clothes surrounded the graduate student on a sidewalk in Somerville.

“Hey ma’am,” one said, and grabbed Ozturk’s wrists. She screamed as several others surrounded her.

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“Can I just call the police?” Ozturk asked in the surveillance video. “We are the police,” one masked, hooded person responded. They handcuffed her and dragged her away.

In a Thursday press conference, Secretary of State Marco Rubio defended Ozturk’s abduction. “Every time I find one of these lunatics, I take away their visa,” he told reporters Thursday. Ozturk’s “lunatic”

behavior appears to consist only of co-authoring one student newspaper op-ed, exactly one year before she was detained, asking her university to acknowledge a student government resolution calling for divestment from Israel. She has not been charged with any offense, but was painted by Rubio as “a social activist that tears up our university campuses”—and was forcibly disappeared.

Rubio’s State Department, meanwhile, has issued new guidance calling for extensive screening of student visa applicants’ social media for any posts that “demonstrate a degree of approval” of what it calls “terrorist activity.”

Ayoub, of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, says the recent spate of ICE abductions echoes the Nixon era: In 1972, the Nixon White House deployed an extensive surveillance program against Arab communities in the United States—scrutinizing the visa status of anyone who appeared to have an Arabic last name—ostensibly to screen out terrorists.

In practice, Ayoub said, the policy inevitably led to unjust detainments, deportations, and even disappearances: “A number of our community members just disappeared,” he said. “There was no social media, and nobody walked around with a cell phone. So people just disappeared, and you wouldn’t hear from them until six, seven months later.” More than 150,000 people were investigated.

“Before all of this started,” Ayoub said, “I was warning people that we will see the same: people just picked up and moved to a location where we’re not going to hear from them, because this is the practice of what happened before.”

Then, as now, he said, those in power were “banking on not everybody being upset, on people buying into the ‘threat to national security’ type of language.” But it’s no longer as easy for authorities to move in darkness; this time, people are organizing. The same day that footage of Ozturk’s arrest was released, more than one thousand people rallied on her behalf in Somerville, and protests in support of Mahmoud Khalil have been taking place across the country since his arrest almost three weeks ago.

The Trump administration, Ayoub said, is “betting on the idea that not many are going to come out and defend the students, or support the students, or defend their right to express their opinions in this country. But that, I think, is where they’re mistaken.”

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