



POLITICS / MAY 2, 2025

Why I Had to Flee the United States

I was a political prisoner in Egypt. I didn't want to become one again in America.

ABDELRAHMAN ELGENDY

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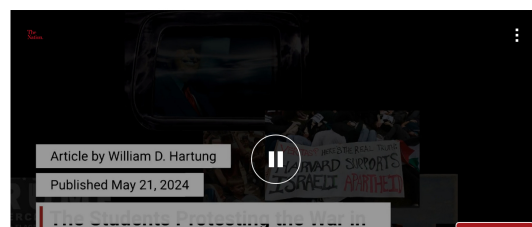


US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents knock on the door of a residence during a multi-agency targeted enforcement operation in Chicago, Illinois, on Sunday, January 26, 2025. (Christopher Dilts / Bloomberg via Getty Images)

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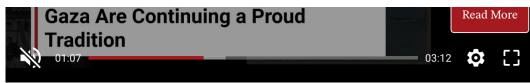
I was a political prisoner for over six years in Egypt. Last week, I fled the US to escape the possibility of the same fate.

After Columbia graduate Mahmoud Khalil was abducted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in front of his university apartment in New York City, I locked myself inside my home for a month. As an Egyptian international student whose name had appeared on one of the Zionist doxxing sites being used by the Trump administration to help pick its deportation targets, I knew to expect the worst. When the administration *revoked* the first F-1 visa at my university, my lawyers gently but unequivocally told me that the question had likely become no longer *if* I would be arrested but *when*.



Article by William D. Hartung

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I had seen it coming. I had watched the horrific [footage](#) of Khalil's arrest—the shock etched on his face, the unmarked car, the officers' imperious *we-do-not-give-our-names*. Khalil's *Habibi*, *it's fine*, as they wrenched him away from his terrorized, eight-months-pregnant wife (she has since given [birth](#) to their child while Khalil languishes in jail). Other arrests swiftly followed. I remain haunted by [Rümeysa Öztürk's stricken, darting eyes](#) as the agents closed in on her on the street—the normalcy rupturing into terror, an unmaking I knew too well.

The hallmark of authoritarianism isn't the knock at the door—it's life under the constant fear of its arrival.

Two weeks into my self-imposed lockdown, I recalled prison's inertia: life on standby on my *farsha*—the prisoner's sleeping spot, made of two prison-issue blankets—plastic bags always packed by my head, ready for the next uprooting. That same agitation simmered under my skin as I sat in my hollow Pittsburgh apartment, dismantled into six bulging suitcases I had packed in the first week of my lockdown. I lined them up by my desk, my flight one click away.

I ordered groceries under a fake e-mail and only unlocked my door after midnight to retrieve them. When I had to run two urgent errands, friends came with cars, scanned the block for suspicious people or vehicles, then pulled up to the building's back door. I slipped in and out like contraband.

For a month, I opened my eyes each morning and reached for my phone. I refreshed my profile on the Zionist doxxing site, then googled my name with the “past 24 hours” filter. I exhaled when no new targeting campaign appeared.

Current Issue



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With each new arrest, I rushed to my desk, reopened the flight booking tab—then hesitated. It wasn't just a departure I was weighing; it was the abandonment of a life I had painstakingly built against the conditions of my exile—a life that almost began to resemble a home. I had forged a community whose love burned with the kind of intensity often only born of shared oppression. My memoir, written over years inside prison and in exile, was at last due to come out next year. My MFA graduation loomed just weeks away. It crushed me, with one life already abandoned when I fled my country, to relinquish it all again on the cusp of culmination. Yet the horizon before me was not merely deportation—it was a lifetime in prison if I were shipped back to Egypt.

On one of my last mornings in the US, a sharp breeze slipped through the cracked window by my desk. I stood and walked to the couch, where the only three unpacked pieces of winter clothing lay in disarray. I reached for a loose, night-black sweatshirt that brought me comfort—but paused. Rain drummed steadily against the glass. I turned and picked the gray Pitt hoodie to its right instead.

I realized that I'd calculated, without thinking, what I'd need to be wearing if ICE's knock came today.

I went to my laptop and booked my flight.



Over the past weeks, many sympathizers have chosen not to label Khalil, Öztürk, and other targeted students as political prisoners, opting instead to [frame](#) the issue around First Amendment rights. There's been an [overreach](#), they'd say. A violation of [due process](#), a disregard for [proper channels](#) in enforcing the rule of law. But political prisoners—in the United States?

Setting aside the fact that there have [always](#) been political prisoners in the United States, I am in a position to know what we're looking at. And let me tell you—it is the same worn textbook.

The issue is not that Mahmoud Khalil holds a green card, nor is it only that his arrest violated “due process,” though many liberal

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Americans indeed wish us to take issue with only that. The issue is that Khalil and the others who have been abducted in recent weeks are being jailed because they were dissident protesters, student organizers, op-ed authors, and anti-genocide activists. In other words, they have been targeted for their political views. They are political prisoners.

The United States and its people have never hesitated to apply the label of political incarceration to our region. To many, the term is reserved for our nations, lands afar under authoritarian rule, the so-called barbaric non-democracies. The reluctance among many Americans—including those who consider themselves allies to those of us being hunted—to call a thing what it is in itself a form of supremacy.

No authoritarian government labels its political incarcerations as such. In Egypt, the military dictatorship also asserts that it does not have political prisoners. Instead, it revives obsolete assembly-ban laws and ratifies new ones to legalize the process.

Then comes the terrorism handbook. After the 2013 military coup, the Ikhwan—the Muslim Brotherhood—were swiftly designated a terrorist organization, their transformation into enemies of the state to be eradicated sealed overnight. Ikhwan were massacred and imprisoned by the tens of thousands, followed by state-sponsored language crafted to grease the atrocities: liquidation of terrorists, terrorism courts, and a war on terror. Soon, no one was safe: Leftists were labeled Ikhwan. Liberals, Ikhwan. Seculars, Ikhwan. Ultras football fans, Ikhwan. And still, none were recognized as political prisoners. For if all opposition is Ikhwan, and all Ikhwan are terrorists, then 60,000 political prisoners cease to exist.

In the US, the language is identical, copied from the same textbook. Executive orders and proposed laws cloak political incarceration in legality. It's not political imprisonment; it's "Protecting the United States from Foreign Terrorists" and "Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism." Much like Egypt's cornerstone anti-assembly law, an archaic British colonial law from 1914, originally designed to crush Egyptian dissent under occupation, the US Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 grants the secretary of state sweeping powers to revoke visas from foreigners deemed a threat and order their deportation. At the time of its inception, it aimed to target Jewish Holocaust survivors suspected of being Soviet spies. Both laws are relics of a bygone era, resurrected to serve the same purpose: McCarthyist witch hunts.

Of course, a witch hunt needs witches. Thus, by calculated design and linguistic warfare, the Trump administration has worked to turn its political prisoners into radical foreign pro-terror agitators, orchestrating activities tied to US-designated terrorist groups. Thus, it becomes not only acceptable, but necessary, to vanish them in the dead of night and ship them across the country for disposal.

This is precisely how political incarceration has always functioned.

תואר ראשון, שני או דוקטורט הישרמו למפגש ייעוץ בזום בכל יום שני
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Many Americans watching this unfold declare that the United States is descending into fascism. We whose bodies have always borne the brunt of this country's violence know better. The US is not "descending" into fascism. The US is a nation built on the genocide of its Indigenous population, the enslavement of Black people, and over a century of racial segregation. The current terror ICE is unleashing on immigrant

communities builds on a long-standing [history](#) of racist, xenophobic immigration policies and [enforcement](#).

Through its foreign policy, the United States has long been a major investor in authoritarianism, whether directly wrecking our countries or outsourcing the brutal work to local military proxies. Its obsession with maintaining an internal [façade](#) of color blindness and superior values is relatively recent. But as Christina Sharpe says in *Ordinary Notes*: “The machinery of whiteness constantly deploys violence—and in a mirror-register, constantly manufactures wonder, surprise, and innocence in relation to that violence.”

People like me have spent our entire lives at the receiving end of US imperialism, its bloody foreign policy rooted in our subjugation. As an Egyptian, I’ve experienced firsthand how the US has been one of the chief [architects](#) in installing and [propping up](#) Egypt’s dictators—the third-largest recipient of US military aid—to serve US interests in [securing](#) the Israeli occupation’s safety, and [preserving](#) US regional hegemony. The US has consistently employed [legal](#) and [logical](#) contortions to [continue](#) bolstering Egypt’s military regime. In 2019, Trump even [called](#) Sisi his “favorite dictator.”

Our persecuted fled to the US from prisons, wars, and bloodshed, the belly of the beast a refuge from its claws tearing at our homelands. But today, we relive the very realities we fled: huddling in friends’ homes, recoiling at every knock on the door, erasing social media, wiping phones of political traces, deleting evidence of activism, leaving instructions for lawyers and loved ones, and writing [anonymous](#) opinion pieces in fear of state retaliation. The beast has simply turned its claws once more inward, thrashing within its own guts, its hunger to eradicate the “[undesirables](#)” finally surpassing its urge to preserve the veneer of freedom.

I suspected I would have to leave when I curled up at home, watching the prevailing rallying [cry](#) across [social media](#): that they will [come](#) for citizens next—not that they’ve already come for us. For a significant number of indignant Americans, the panic over [free speech](#) and [First Amendment](#) rights is but a fear of finding themselves caught on the wrong end of the bruise. In this country, our crushed nonresident alien bodies tend to hold no value except as an ominous sign for what might befall an American, our cuffs a mere foreshadowing of hypothetical ones around a US citizen’s wrist.

While our people are being picked off one by one, I write to you from my new exile to tell you—it is the same worn textbook. It began with Mahmoud Khalil, a test case, a measure of how far they can push. Then, [Leqaa Kordia](#), [Rümeysa Öztürk](#), [Badar Khan Suri](#). When met with nothing more than petitions, social media outrage, and containable protests, others have followed. What erupts after is a tide of repression. The names will cascade faster than petitions can be drafted, swifter than symbols can be memorialized. The scale of mass detentions and deportations will overwhelm even true allies. And if it was tolerated when it had been only one, it will be tolerated as the numbers swell. It will settle into the new rhythm of life, punctuated by the occasional shared post that soothes a conscience.

As for myself, I venture into a new unknown, my life packed in bags as it had been for years in prison, seeking a new [ghourba](#) that will take my exiled body—at least for a while. Through it all, I regret nothing.

How can anything compare to the inflamed arm of 19-year-old [Shaaban al-Dalou](#), hooked to an IV, reaching toward something as it burns into stillness? To 7-year-old Sidra Hassouna’s small, shredded body hanging from the ruins of her family’s shelter after a US-funded Israeli air strike? To 6-year-old [Hind Rajab](#), martyred after surviving an occupation-bombed vehicle that killed her entire family—her final words: “I’m so scared, please come. Come take me. Please, will you come?”

I long ago decided to shout into every microphone until it was snatched away, replaced by dangling cuffs. When that happens, I know it’s time: I roll my [farsha](#), haul my bags, and enter exile anew. **N**

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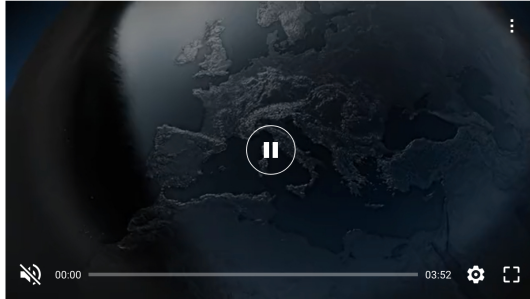
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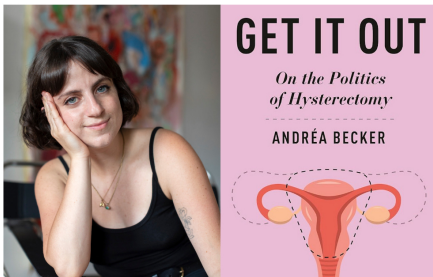
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Abdelrahman ElGendy

Abdelrahman ElGendy is an Egyptian writer and translator and the author of the forthcoming *Huna*, a memoir exploring the politics of dissent and erasure through his six-year political incarceration in Egypt.



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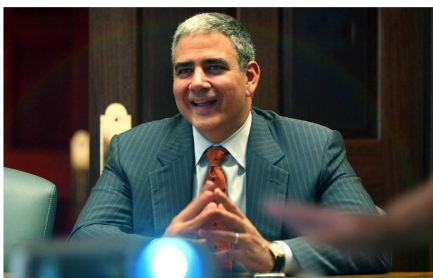
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