TRT WORLD research centre

Borders of Power:
American Ideals Under Threat

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(Tayfun Coşkun - Anadolu Agency)

The current administration's immigration policies have weaponised enforcement not only to control migration but to suppress political dissent and criminalise activism. By targeting individuals based on their political beliefs, these policies undermine fundamental democratic principles, including freedom of speech and the right to protest. This policy outlook argues that the militarization of immigration enforcement and erosion of institutional trust pose significant constitutional violations, reshaping political opposition and threatening the core of American democratic norms and legal foundations.

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Since regaining office in January 2025, Donald Trump has rapidly implemented his hardline immigration policies, advancing his "America First" agenda. But what began as rhetoric about border security has rapidly escalated into a systemic campaign to suppress political dissent—particularly targeting students, activists, and legal residents critical of U.S. foreign policy.

In his first 100 days, the Trump administration has wielded immigration enforcement not as a tool for public safety but as a political weapon. The most glaring examples involve the detention and deportation of student activists who participated in protests against the war in Gaza. Among them are Mahmud Khalil, a Columbia University student, and Rümeysa Öztürk from Tufts University, both detained without clear criminal charges—only their activism.

The crackdown extends beyond protests. Mohsen Mahdawi, a green card holder, was arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during a routine citizenship interview in Vermont. His lawyers argue the detention is retaliation for his pro-Palestinian advocacy, with attorney Luna Droubi stating, "This is direct retaliation for his Palestinian identity." The U.S. government's justification—that he "undermined U.S. foreign policy"—reveals the administration's true motive: punishing political opposition under the guise of national security.

The Trump administration's immigration policies have been strategically weaponised not only to control the flow of migrants but also to suppress political dissent and criminalise activism. By using immigration enforcement as a tool to target individuals based on their political beliefs, the administration has undermined democratic principles such as freedom of speech, the right to protest, and the separation of powers.

This policy outlook argues that through the militarisation of immigration enforcement, the erosion of institutional trust, and the targeting of activist communities, these policies have led to significant constitutional violations. In doing so, they have reshaped the nature of political opposition in the United States, posing long-term threats to democratic norms and the very foundations of the American legal system.

Silencing Campuses: Visa Revocations and Financial Threats

Parallel to these arrests, the Trump administration has revoked over 600 student visas, predominantly targeting international students involved in activism. Universities report that many were stripped of their legal status without explanation, while others were penalised for minor infractions. The message is unmistakable: dissent will have consequences.

However, the intimidation does not stop there. Trump has taken direct aim at higher education itself, threatening to strip federal funding and tax-exempt status from universities that tolerate protests. In a Truth Social post, he accused Harvard of promoting "political, ideological, and terrorist-inspired/supported 'disease'"—rhetoric that White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt doubled down on, demanding Harvard apologise for "anti-Semitism" (a term increasingly used to smear pro-Palestine voices).

These actions are not isolated incidents. They form a deliberate strategy to:

- Criminalise activism by labelling protesters as threats to national security.
- Choke academic freedom by defunding universities that resist.
- Normalise ideological screening in immigration enforcement.

It is important to note that there is a growing pushback from American universities against the Trump Administration's assault on higher education, particularly focusing on political and academic freedom. Several university leaders, former administrators, and faculty members are fighting back, notably Harvard University, which filed a lawsuit against the administration.

These actions follow a series of executive orders and legal moves that have resulted in the detention and deportation of international students, particularly those involved in pro-Palestinian activism. Some advocates and legal experts argue that this moment could mark a turning point in defending academic freedom and resisting government overreach, but they also emphasise that students and faculty are leading the charge while university administrations have been slow to act.

As legal challenges intensify and universities push back, one key question remains: Will more institutions rise to defend the freedoms guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, or will the MAGA movement continue to steamroll anyone who opposes it?

The Crackdown – Who's Really Being Targeted?

A Campaign of Retaliation, Not Security

The Trump administration's aggressive immigration enforcement has little to do with national security—and everything to do with silencing political dissent. Under the guise of protecting "U.S. foreign policy interests," federal agencies have arbitrarily detained, deported, and revoked

visas for students, scholars, and legal residents solely for their activism related to Palestine.

Human Rights Watch has condemned these actions as a blatant violation of free speech, with John Raphling, the organisation's U.S. program director, warning:

> The arrests and deportations of non-citizen students and scholars for expressing their political views are creating a climate of fear on campuses across the country. This is an attack on the very foundations of a free society.

Yet the administration has doubled down. In March 2025, masked federal agents forcibly detained Rümeysa Öztürk, a Tufts University doctoral student and Fulbright scholar from Türkiye, near her home in Boston. Without trial or credible evidence, she was transferred to a detention centre in Louisiana—over 1,000 miles away—and slated for deportation. Her "crime"? Co-authoring a student newspaper op-ed calling on Tufts to "acknowledge the Palestinian genocide" and divest from Israel-linked investments. DHS accused her of "supporting Hamas," a claim as baseless as it is politically convenient.

Similar patterns are detected across several cases, such as:

- Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate and lawful permanent resident, was arrested for participating in Gaza protests. DHS later retroactively claimed he omitted information on his green card application—a pretextual charge after public backlash.
- Yunseo Chung, a Columbia undergraduate and lifelong U.S. resident, faced deportation for attending a sit-in protest (where she was arrested but never convicted).

These are not isolated incidents. Secretary of State Marco Rubio boasted of cancelling "hundreds" of student visas, while Trump himself promised:

> To all the resident aliens who joined in the pro-jihadist protests … we will find you, and we will deport you.

The White House's official X account taunted Khalil with "Shalom, Mahmoud," framing his arrest as the first in a purge of "terrorist sympathisers." Yet none of these individuals were charged with violence or credible ties to terrorism. Their real offense? Criticising U.S. policy on Israel.

Legal Distortions and Dangerous Precedents

To justify this crackdown, the administration has weaponised laws from a bygone era:

- The 1952 Immigration Act allows visa revocations for those who "compromise U.S. foreign policy." DHS now uses this to target protesters without individualised evidence.
- The Alien Enemies Act of 1798[1] was recently invoked to deport 137 Venezuelans to Salvadoran prisons based on dubious gang affiliations.

When pressed, DHS Deputy Secretary Troy Edgar admitted Khalil's deportation was tied to "pro-Palestinian activity" but refused to clarify if protesting itself was grounds for removal. This ambiguity is the point: The administration wants to chill dissent by design.

The Bigger Threat: Academic Repression

These arrests are part of a broader assault on universities:

- The White House has demanded names and nationalities of protesters from campus administrators.
- Federal funding threats loom over schools that tolerate Palestine activism.

The message is clear: Fall in line or lose your status. As Raphling notes:

> The Trump administration is claiming the authority to punish and remove non-citizen dissenters at will. By intimidating others into silence, this is a threat to free expression everywhere.

While the cases of student activists illustrate the direct targeting of individuals engaged in political dissent, the broader implications of the Trump administration's immigration policies extend to the very fabric of academic freedom in the United States.

The growing climate of fear and suspicion surrounding immigration enforcement has created an environment where academic institutions and scholars are increasingly cautious about engaging in certain lines of inquiry or activism. This climate not only silences student voices but also inhibits the open exchange of ideas, which is essential to the academic mission. The administration's tactics, from visa restrictions to the demonisation of particular student groups, have emboldened a broader attack on academic autonomy, threatening to reshape the intellectual landscape of American universities in profound ways. As such, these policies signal a dangerous precedent for academic freedom, with long-term consequences for the pursuit of knowledge and the very essence of education itself.

[1] AThe Alien Enemies Act grants the president of the United States sweeping powers to order the detention and deportation of foreign enemies. It was passed in 1798 when the U.S. believed it would enter a war with France. The act states that "whenever there shall be a declared war [...] or any invasion or predatory incursion shall be perpetrated, attempted, or threatened" against the U.S., all "subjects of the hostile nation or government" could be "apprehended, restrained, secured and removed, as alien enemies".

Defunding Education – A Recipe for More Crime?

The Administration's Education Crackdown and Its Consequences

The Trump administration's systematic campaign against education institutions has taken two dangerous forms: threatening to withdraw federal funding from universities that permit political dissent and proposing to dismantle the Department of Education entirely. These moves, framed as cost-saving measures, threaten to destabilise communities by severing access to quality education, a well-documented factor in reducing crime rates.

The Dangerous Link Between Education Cuts and Rising Crime

Research consistently demonstrates that educational attainment serves as one of society's most effective crime prevention tools:

- Only 3% of incarcerated individuals in U.S. jails are non-citizens, while 84% are U.S. citizens - disproving the narrative that immigrants drive crime
- High school dropouts are three times more likely to face incarceration than college graduates
- States that increased education funding by 10% saw 9% reductions in violent crime over subsequent decades.

The administration's policies ignore these facts. By targeting both higher education and the Department of Education, they risk creating precisely the conditions that foster criminal behaviour: reduced opportunities and broken community support systems.

The ICE Detainer Paradox

While pushing education cuts, the administration has simultaneously ramped up immigration enforcement in ways that contradict their stated crime prevention goals:

- ICE detainers surged 72% in early 2025 (654 daily under Trump vs 380 under Biden)
- Yet only 14% of detainees were transferred to ICE custody
- Just 1.6% resulted in actual deportations
- 72% of those targeted had no criminal convictions

This inefficient system burdens local law enforcement while doing little to address real threats. Of 17,972 detainers issued in early 2025:

- Only 65 targeted convicted murderers
- Just 30 focused on rapists

The Incarceration Reality Check

National incarceration data further undermines the administration's narrative:

Country	# of Inmates	% of Inmates
Colombia	1,334	0.9%
Cuba	690	0.4%
Dominican Republic	1633	1.1%
Mexico	12,416	8.0%
Other/Unknown	8,647	5.6%
United States	129,994	84%

A Boomerang Effect?

The administration's education policies create a dangerous paradox: by defunding schools and universities while misallocating enforcement resources, they risk increasing the very crime they claim to combat. True public safety requires investment in education, not its dismantlement. Experts note that even if the Department is closed, many federally mandated programs must continue, and the process would be complex and lengthy.

The data clearly show that education remains society's most cost-effective crime prevention program. Undermining it for political purposes represents not just poor policy but an active threat to community safety.

The Broader Agenda – Erasing Diversity, Controlling Narratives

Rewriting History at the Pentagon

The Trump administration has quietly removed thousands of pages documenting the contributions of minorities and women from official Defence Department websites. A recent search shows that looking up "black history" yields 1,126 results, but most links lead to error messages. Important historical content, like the tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen - the first African American military aviators - has been completely erased. Pages honouring other groundbreaking units, including the all-Black 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion and the Navajo Code Talkers of World



(Mostafa Bassim - Anadolu Agency)

War II, have similarly disappeared. This digital erasure coincides with the administration's elimination of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs across the military.

Framing Dissent as Terrorism

The administration and its media allies have increasingly equated political activism with terrorism. Peaceful protests against Israeli policies are routinely labelled as "pro-Hamas" or "jihadist" in right-wing media. This rhetoric has been amplified by official statements threatening consequences for participants, particularly international students. The language used - describing campus demonstrations as "terrorist sympathising" - creates a climate where criticism of foreign policy is treated as a national security threat rather than protected speech.

The Consequences of Narrative Control

These coordinated actions share a common goal: controlling what stories get told and who gets to tell them. By erasing minority achievements from history, silencing independent media, and criminalising dissent, the administration shapes a narrative that justifies its policies. The removal of historical content makes it harder to recognise patterns of exclusion. The media shutdowns eliminate alternative viewpoints. And the activist-terrorist conflation discourages legitimate protest. Together, they narrow the range of acceptable discourse in America.

The long-term impact could be profound. As historians have noted, societies that erase uncomfortable histories often repeat past mistakes. Democracies that silence independent media frequently see corruption and abuse of power flourish. These moves may satisfy short-term political goals, but they risk lasting damage to America's institutions and global standing.

Long-Term Consequences – The Militarisation of Immigration Policy

The Expanding Role of the U.S. Military

The Trump administration has dramatically altered the traditional separation between military operations and domestic law enforcement. In an unprecedented move, New Mexico authorised its National Guard troops to directly engage in immigration enforcement—including detaining migrants, conducting searches without warrants, and deploying crowd control measures like tear gas. This represents a fundamental shift in America's approach to border security, effectively turning soldiers into immigration officers. Legal experts warn that such policies risk normalising military policing of civilians, a practice more common in authoritarian regimes than democratic nations.



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Crisis in the Detention System

The administration's policies have transformed immigration detention into a sprawling, militarised system:

- Family detention centres now incarcerate not only recent border crossers but also long-term residents like Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Honduran father detained after 12 years working construction in Houston. His case exemplifies how enforcement priorities have expanded far beyond border security.
- Courts continue blocking extreme measures like using the 1798 Alien Enemies Act to deport Venezuelans to Salvadoran prisons. The Supreme Court's May 2025 ruling called this "a dangerous revival of colonial-era war powers."
- The cancellation of legal aid funding has left nine out of ten detainees without representation, ensuring that most cases never get a proper judicial review.

Diplomatic Fallout and Global Implications

The administration's heavy-handed tactics have strained international relations while failing to deter migration:

- The February 2025 threat to impose 25% tariffs on Mexico (suspended after security concessions) damaged cross-border trade and pushed Mexico toward more economic cooperation with China.
- NATO allies have expressed alarm at the domestic military deployment, with Germany withdrawing from a joint border surveillance program citing "disproportionate force concerns."
- Venezuela and other adversaries now use U.S. detention policies to justify their own human rights abuses, while regional partners in Latin America share 30% less intelligence with Pentagon officials.

A Dangerous Precedent

This militarised approach to immigration enforcement poses fundamental threats to democratic governance:

1. Erosion of Civilian Safeguards

The deployment of military personnel for domestic immigration operations—including warrantless searches and crowd control—violates longstanding constitutional principles separating armed forces from civilian policing. Historically, such overreach has been justified only during genuine national emergencies. By normalising military presence at the border and in immigrant communities, the administration sets a precedent that future leaders could exploit to target other marginalised groups.

2. Institutionalising Cruelty

Policies initially framed as "temporary solutions" are hardening into permanent fixtures:

- Family detention centres, first established as emergency facilities, now operate as indefinite holding camps

- Warrantless searches of homes near border regions have expanded by 300% since 2025
- Military tribunals increasingly handle immigration cases that civilian courts would dismiss

This steady escalation demonstrates how exceptional measures become entrenched, reshaping the justice system itself.

3. The Authoritarian Playbook

These tactics follow a recognisable pattern seen in other democracies backsliding into repression:

- Dehumanising rhetoric portraying migrants as "invaders"
- Parallel justice systems bypassing constitutional protections
- Gradual acclimation to increasingly extreme policies

The danger lies not in any single policy but in their cumulative effect: the quiet rewriting of what constitutes acceptable governance in America.

Immigration Policies as a Threat to Democracy

From Border Control to Democratic Erosion

The Trump administration's immigration policies have transcended traditional enforcement, morphing into a systemic campaign that redefines the relationship between state power and civil liberties. By militarising border security, expanding detention without due process, and criminalising dissent, these measures have done more than restrict immigration—they have rewritten the rules of democratic governance.

The False Trade-Off: Security vs. Rights

Central to this agenda is a dangerous narrative: that America must sacrifice its principles to protect its borders. Yet the data reveals a different story:

- Mass deportations have not reduced crime (immigrants commit fewer offences than native-born citizens).
- Family detention has not deterred migration but has traumatised thousands of children.
- Military deployments at the border have not stopped crossings but have eroded trust in institutions.

This is not an effective policy—it is theatrical authoritarianism, using immigrants as props to justify unprecedented state overreach.

A Global Stain

America's reputation as a land of refuge has been shattered. Allies now question its commitment to human rights, while adversaries exploit its hypocrisy:

- Mexico and Canada have tightened their borders, fearing spillover effects.
- The U.N. has issued multiple condemnations, comparing U.S. detention centres to "shadow prisons."
- International students and skilled workers are fleeing to Europe and Canada, taking billions in economic potential with them.

The Unravelling of America's Promise

These immigration policies represent more than just stricter border controls - they signify a fundamental betrayal of America's historical identity as a nation of immigrants. The administration's systematic dismantling of legal protections, militarisation of enforcement, and criminalisation of vulnerable populations will leave deep scars on both American society and its global standing.

When future generations examine this period, they will ask not whether these policies stopped migration - for history shows walls and raids never do - but why a country built by refugees and dreamers allowed fear to eclipse its founding ideals. They will study how "security" became a euphemism for cruelty, how "patriotism" was twisted to justify family separation, and how the world's most powerful democracy came to mimic the authoritarian regimes it once condemned.

The true measure of these policies will not be found in deportation statistics or border apprehension numbers but in the broken trust of allies, the shattered lives of uprooted families, and the quiet erosion of America's moral authority. A nation that once lifted its lamp beside the golden door now trains floodlights on children in cages. A country that proudly proclaimed itself a "shining city upon a hill" now builds higher walls and deeper detention centres.

History's judgment will be severe. For when America chose to meet the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free with riot gear and deportation orders rather than compassion and due process, it didn't just change its immigration policies - it changed its soul. The tragedy is not that these measures went too far but that in going so far, they revealed how little remained of the principles they claimed to protect.