

Australian writer deported at US border after questioning about Gaza protests

Mike Head
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The global scope of the suppression of political dissent being spearheaded by the Trump administration was highlighted last Thursday when a young Australian writer was refused entry to the United States and forced back to Australia.

Alistair Kitchen, 33, was interrogated for 45 minutes about his opinions and articles last year on anti-Gaza genocide protests at New York's Columbia University. He was detained for 12 hours at Los Angeles International Airport before being put on a plane back to Melbourne. Kitchen had been on his way to visit friends in New York.

Kitchen was a creative writing student at Columbia last year, when he posted favourable dispatches on the student protests on his "Kitchen Counter" Substack blog. This year, after returning to Australia to live, he opposed the Trump administration's detention of Mahmoud Khalil, the lead negotiator of the Columbia Gaza Solidarity Encampment.

Kitchen told the *Guardian* he was "clearly targeted for politically motivated reasons." He said US border officers questioned him about his views on Israel and Palestine, including his "thoughts on Hamas." It was "quite an in-depth probing of my views on the war."

This is tantamount to being interrogated for supposed thought crimes.

Kitchen recounted: "The CBP [Customs and Border Protection] explicitly said to me, the reason you have been detained is because of your writing on the Columbia student protests."

During those demonstrations, students—including many Jewish students—participated in an encampment and temporarily occupied some buildings, to oppose the Israeli genocide before their protests were violently broken up by police, backed by the then Biden administration.

Kitchen said he lived in New York for six years and wrote about the protests at Columbia while he was a master's student there, before moving back to Australia in 2024. In March this year, he posted an article in which he said Khalil had been arrested "on utterly specious grounds by a neo-fascist state" with the goal of "the deportation of dissent."

In that blog, Kitchen had also criticised the lack of any opposition by the Democrats. "The Democrats seem as unwilling as they are unable to amount a defence of liberalism," he wrote. "I suspect that the Trump administration chose to make an example out of Khalil for this reason. They knew no concerted action would come. They knew they could get away with it."

Kitchen said he had previously deleted "sensitive political posts" from his blog as well as "some social media" because he was aware of the increased risk of crossing the US border. He believed US border officials had used technology to link his deleted posts to his application for an Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), which allows eligible visitors to make a short trip to the US without a visa.

This indicates extensive electronic surveillance. ESTA is an automated system that collects, in advance of travel, biographical information and answers to questions about eligibility for entry into the US under a Visa Waiver Program. On the basis of this and other stored data, CPB officers then determine admissibility upon a traveller's arrival.

Kitchen said he was summoned over the intercom shortly after exiting the plane at Los Angeles and "taken into a back room" for secondary processing. "Clearly, they had technology in their system which linked those posts to my ESTA ... a long time before I took them down," he said. "Because they knew all about the posts, and then interrogated me about the

posts.”

Kitchen told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that after officers seized his phone, he “made the mistake” of giving them his phone passcode, whereupon officials downloaded the phone’s content. Officers then claimed to have found evidence of drug use on his phone, dating back to his six years in New York, where had legally bought marijuana at dispensaries.

Kitchen was taken to an immigration detention facility, which he described as a basement with “fluorescent buzzing bulbs,” a television, some instant noodles in a cup, and a guard, where detainees were not allowed to talk to each other.

Even after being placed on a flight, he was not allowed to get his phone back until more than 14 hours later when the Qantas plane landed in Melbourne on Saturday.

This could not happen without the complicity of the Australian Labor government. Asked by a journalist yesterday, Acting Prime Minister Richard Marles claimed to be unaware of Kitchen’s interrogation, despite it being widely reported. While claiming to defend free speech, Marles said he was not going to “speculate” about what was happening at the US border.

Marles doubled down on the government’s collaboration with the fascistic Trump administration, even as it was deploying active-duty troops into Los Angeles, overseeing a massive assault on immigrants, and threatening to unleash the military against protests across the country.

Referring to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s planned talks with Trump on Tuesday on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Canada, Marles affirmed: “Our relationship with the United States is a profoundly important one. Our alliance remains the cornerstone of our strategic policy and our foreign policy and we very much look forward to the meeting between the prime minister and the president.”

This is not the first time that the Labor government has acquiesced in the Trump administration’s police-state measures. Last week, Lauren Tomasi, a correspondent for Australia’s Nine Network, was shot by US cops with a rubber bullet, in what was clearly a targeted shooting, while covering the massive national guard-military mobilisation ordered by the Trump

administration in Los Angeles.

Albanese and other government leaders remained silent on the shooting, even after the footage of it had been viewed by millions of people in Australia, the US and internationally. Asked about it at the National Press Club, he vaguely claimed to have raised the “unacceptable” incident with the US administration, but provided no detail.

In lining up with Trump, Labor has continued to politically, diplomatically and materially support the mass slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza, in one of the worst war crimes since the 1930s.

At the direct behest of the Labor government, Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a well-known pro-Palestinian academic at Sydney’s Macquarie University, was stripped of her research funding earlier this year. Labor has also backed university managements, most recently at the University of Melbourne, in expelling or suspending students for involvement in pro-Palestinian protests.

Together with Zionist organisations and the corporate media, Labor has falsely equated opposition to the genocide and to the ultra-nationalist political ideology of Zionism with antisemitism, in order to try to silence and intimidate dissent.

The Labor government’s failure to oppose Kitchen’s interrogation and deportation from the US is in line with the anti-democratic methods used in Australia to persecute refugees and immigrants. While the attack on free speech and basic democratic rights is most sharply expressed in the United States, the erosion of democratic rights is well advanced in Australia as well.



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