

“I was moved around like cattle”: Ward Sakeik, US college graduate and homeowner, speaks out following 140 days in ICE hellhole

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4 July 2025

On Thursday, Ward Sakeik—a 22-year-old college graduate, professional wedding photographer, Texas homeowner and newlywed—held a press conference just 48 hours after her release from immigration detention. She had been imprisoned by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for 140 days and faced deportation to “the borders of Israel” for the crime of being born a stateless Palestinian.

Despite a court order blocking her removal from Texas, ICE agents attempted to deport Sakeik on three separate occasions, most recently on June 30.

At Thursday’s press conference, Sakeik—often holding back tears—spoke powerfully in defense of human and democratic rights, while exposing the torturous and inhumane conditions inside the US immigration gulags.

“I was handcuffed for 16 hours without any water or food on the bus,” she said. “I was moved around like cattle. The US government tried to dump me in a part of the world where I had no idea where I was going, what I was doing.

“They had two failed deportations, and these deportations they just happened all of a sudden. I was not given a phone call.”

Sakeik said there were stretches—“36 hours, 50 hours”—when she was not allowed to call her attorney or her husband. ICE thugs told her she could contact her family and lawyer “when you get to the country or when you get to the transfer or whenever you get wherever you’re getting.”

Sakeik explained, “I’ve been a resident of the United States since I was 8 years old. I went to college, I run a successful wedding photography business here in [Dallas-Fort Worth], and I recently married Taahir [Shaikh].

“My family did come here in 2011 seeking asylum. We have followed all immigration policies and have complied with every single thing, every single document, every single piece of paper, every single thing that was thrown at us.”

She added that she was in the final stages of acquiring her green card. None of this prevented her from being targeted by the state.

“I did lose 5 months of my life,” Sakeik said, “because I was criminalized for being stateless, something that I absolutely have no control over. I didn’t choose to be stateless. I didn’t do a crime that made me stateless. I had no choice.”

Sakeik explained that while she was detained, she and the other women imprisoned with her used art as a form of expression. “I asked the women that I was jailed with to work on an art project with me that I wanted to hang in my office at home,” she said. “I asked them

to draw their flags and to write next to the flags what their country represented.

“We drew together, and they shared the most beautiful stories,” Sakeik said. Some of the flags remained unfinished, she explained, because “I was transferred for deportation,” while others “were unfortunately deported before I was able to add on more flags.”

She said the collage, which featured over 25 flags, “was not even half of the countries that were with me. This is all from the beautiful women I was detained with—they are absolutely remarkable.”

Sakeik said the women she was detained with “come here for better lives and are voiceless and helpless. A lot of these women don’t have the money for lawyers or media outreach. They come here to provide for their families and that is pretty much it.

“They are mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers. They are superheroes. They are humans, and their lives hold value. And I will continue to fight with them, for them every single step of the way. I’m not going to stop.

“I also want the world to know that the women who do come here, [they] come here for a better life but they are criminalized for that. They are dehumanized. And they are stripped of their rights. We have been treated as a ‘less than’ simply for wanting a better life.”

Sakeik explained that throughout her five-month detention, she was transferred to three different facilities. She explained that the conditions inside all of them were “terrible.”

“Extremely unhygienic, dust everywhere.” Throughout her imprisonment she put in multiple requests to get the facilities cleaned because “women are getting sick left and right because it is extremely dusty.”

Sakeik was arrested in February in Miami, Florida, while flying back home from her honeymoon in the US Virgin Islands. She explained that following her arrest, “I was on the bus for 16 hours handcuffed from head to toe on wooden benches with me and several other women...

“We were not given water or food, and we would smell the driver eating Chick-fil-A. We would ask for water, bang on the door for food, and he would just turn up the radio and act like he wasn’t listening to us.

“When I got to intake, we were thrown in intake, literally like animals, for about 7 hours in just an intake room.”

Sakeik explained how small and cramped the intake rooms were: “Sometimes 400 square feet, sometimes they could be 700 square feet. A bunch of women are inside with a toilet. No soap. No water. And

you are just going to sit there and wait to be checked into the facility.”

Her second transfer involved taking three separate van trips. The whole time guards would not tell her anything about where she was going, or when she could expect to arrive. The only thing the guards seemed to know was that she should not to drink water because the van wasn’t going to stop for her to utilize the latrine.

At the second facility, Sakeik said she was held in a tiny 400 square foot intake room that had a capacity of only 10 people, but in which 18 women were squeezed in. Holding back tears, Sakeik said, “The water we were drinking was just sink water.”

“‘Be grateful we gave you water’ is what they would say,” Sakeik added.

Inside the facilities she said, “We would eat the same packaged food every single day.” She said the women were forced to sleep in rooms as cold as 50 degrees F (10 degrees C) yet were denied blankets by the guards.

“I’ve seen women that needed their medication, and they were not given their medication.

“The restrooms are very, very, very much unhygienic. The beds have rust everywhere. They are not properly maintained. There are ants, cockroaches, grasshoppers, spiders, you name it, all over the facility. Girls will get bit, girls will wake up with giant bruises.”

Speaking of those still trapped inside, Sakeik added, “I want them to know that they are important. ... They all deserve rights. They are all humans, and I will continue to fight for them.”

Following the press conference, Sakeik spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

She noted that one “of the most beautiful things that came out of this traumatizing experience is I was able to see people come together, people advocating for me, people I know, and people I don’t know.”

On the ongoing immigration raids, she said, “It’s coming at such a force to people that are not even criminal. You are just shopping at Home Depot, and the next thing you know you’re on a bus getting detained for just shopping at Home Depot.”

Asked to comment on the mass protests against the Trump administration last month, which centered on the government’s attacks on immigrants, Sakeik said that while she was not able to keep up with the news while detained, “It makes me feel proud to know that this generation is speaking up.”

At the same press conference, members of her legal team, including attorney Eric Lee, provided details of the thuggish tactics of the border agents and the significance of Sakeik’s case and what it means for the working class.

Lee explained: “On Monday morning at about 5:00 Central Time, I received a call from Tahir informing me that ICE was once again, despite a court order, telling Ward that she had to immediately pack all of her belongings and go to intake where she was not told where she was going.”

Sakeik made “repeated efforts” to explain “to the ICE officers that there was a federal court order that they would be disobeying if they attempted to deport her from the United States.” The immigration thugs “told her that she was ‘ranting’ when she mentioned these, the existence of this temporary restraining order. When I made multiple attempts to call the facility to inform them that they would be violating the law and separation of powers upon which a democratic system is based, they hung up on me, and we had to try alternative means of getting through to Ward.

“That should not happen, that does not happen in a democracy.” Lee

noted that Ward “had a number of layers of protection. That is very significant because of what it means for [everyone] in this country ... regardless even of their citizenship, because the administration has just announced plans to denaturalize citizens on a scale that has not been seen before.”

Lee concluded by saying that the Department of Homeland Security statement “that Ward departed the United States because she went on a domestic flight to an American territory has stunning implications that should shock every American.

“If the position of the Department of Homeland Security is that traveling across international waters means that you can be detained by ICE upon your return or that the CBP can set up checkpoints like they do in dictatorships, then what about for anybody who flies between Hawaii and California? What about everybody who flies between New York and Detroit, a flight which passes over Canada? What about people that fly from Alaska to the lower 48?

“The people who are running the Department of Homeland Security have no idea what’s in the Constitution. They are brazenly violating the law, and that should be something that causes extreme concern to everybody who’s paying attention to this case.”

Lee ended by noting the cruelty and hypocrisy of the US government: “The idea that the American government was going to deport Ward to Palestine ... raises a number of important issues.

“Number one, we thought the American government didn’t recognize Palestine as a country. Apparently, that was not an issue that they felt was a hindrance to Ward’s deportation there. More importantly, Palestine is experiencing a genocide at the moment, and the idea that someone who has lived in this country since she was eight years old would be sent to a place where there’s no water, where people are dying of disease and starvation, and dying under Israeli bombs is something that should shock everybody.

“It’s similar to what they are doing with the Salvadorans—Kilmar Abrego Garcia was tortured in CECOT in the El Salvador prison, according to an affidavit filed just a couple of days ago.”

Lee said this Fourth of July holiday “should give us all pause to think about what is happening in this country. If those in this room and those watching believe in the defense of basic democratic rights, they need to stand up and fight for those principles themselves.”



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