Judge denies bail, continues detention of anti-Zionist Hasidic father in bid to deport him to Israel

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An immigration judge in New York City on Wednesday denied bond to Yehonatan Ovadia, a 35-year-old father of five from Rockland County who has been held by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) since August 28. Ovadia, an Israeli citizen, was taken into custody when he appeared for an immigration court proceeding in Manhattan and remains detained in Brooklyn's Metropolitan Detention Center, while the Trump administration is seeking his deportation to Israel.

Ovadia's detention is a retaliatory political attack on an anti-Zionist Jewish religious teacher whose opposition to the Israeli state and its genocidal war against Palestinians arises from his deeply held religious convictions. His case exposes the fraudulent charge of "antisemitism" against outspoken opponents of Zionism and the Gaza genocide.

Ovadia was arrested by ICE on August 28 after being summoned to immigration court in Manhattan. His lawyers filed a federal lawsuit the following day seeking his release, arguing that the US government had retaliated against him for constitutionally protected political and religious expression.

At Wednesday's hearing, the government identified Israel as the country to which it intends to remove Ovadia, according to Chris Godshall-Bennet, one of his attorneys. This prospect is especially vindictive given the administration seeks to expel a Jewish opponent of Zionism to the very state whose political foundations and military crimes he has publicly condemned.

Ovadia came to the United States in 2022 on a temporary religious-worker visa and has worked as a religious teacher. His visa was due to expire in November 2025, and he sought an extension sponsored by Congregation Bnai Yoel in Orange County, New York.

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) did not find him inadmissible for any crime but denied his request for an extension "as a matter of discretion," relying on events surrounding a November 2023 protest in Ramapo. The denial left Ovadia without formal immigration status after the visa's expiration, and this opened the door for his ICE detention.

The protest took place outside Ramapo Town Hall in November 2023—one month after the start of the Israeli genocide in Gaza—when municipal officials displayed an Israeli flag on the city building. Ovadia and other anti-Zionist Jews opposed the use of public authority to endorse the Zionist state, as Israel began its mass killing and destruction in Gaza.

During the protest, the Israeli flag was removed and cut up. Surveillance footage cited by USCIS showed at least four men involved in the physical removal and destruction of the flag. Ovadia has consistently stated that he attended the demonstration but neither removed the flag nor knew in advance that others would do so.

Ramapo police nevertheless arrested Ovadia and Alter Goldberger, initially charging them with criminal mischief, petit larceny and conspiracy, all classified as hate crimes. The charges were a clear attempt to equate opposition to the Israeli state with hostility toward Jewish people, even though the accused were themselves Hasidic Jews protesting alongside other Jews.

The hate crime charges were subsequently dropped. In February 2024, Ovadia entered a plea to disorderly conduct, a non-criminal violation under New York law and paid a $200 fine plus a $125 surcharge.

Ovadia has explained that he accepted the plea not because he was guilty of tearing down the flag, but because he lacked the resources and time to fight an extended prosecution. "I said, 'You know, I don't have power, I'm out of money, I have no time, I am a teacher, I need to teach students every day,'" he told the *New York Times*. "'Let's end this with disorderly conduct.'"

The Trump administration has transformed Ovadia's plea into the basis for stripping him of his rights and putting him into deportation proceedings.

Yehonatan Ovadia is a member of the anti-Zionist Satmar Hasidic community. Satmar doctrine holds that Jews may not establish a sovereign Jewish state before the arrival of the Messiah. This religious position is irreconcilable with the Zionist claim that the state of Israel speaks for all Jews worldwide.

In a statement released through attorney Eric Lee after news of his detention became public, Ovadia addressed Palestinians directly: "From the Jewish people to our Palestinian brothers

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and sisters in Gaza and the West Bank and all over occupied Palestine! We didn't forget you! We are following you and we know that you are facing genocide! Please be strong and continue to believe!"

Ovadia continued, "We know that the Zionist criminal war machine [is] torturing you every day and they want to silence you! BUT we will be your voice! We will SHOUT AND DEMONSTRATE for you from New York, Washington, Canada, London and from every place that we can be free in the world!"

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has explicitly made Ovadia's political views central to its case. In a statement to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, a DHS spokesperson declared, "In violation of our nation's laws, he overstayed his welcome and refused to depart. He will receive due process and remain in ICE custody pending the outcome of his immigration proceedings."

The department added that residence in the US is "a privilege to be granted a visa or green card" and asserted that the administration had acted within its authority against "any alien who advocates for violence, glorifies and supports terrorists, harasses Jews, and steals property." These allegations are completely made up by Trump's DHS, since Ovadia has not done any of these things.

On Wednesday evening, attorney Eric Lee rejected the effort to depict anti-Zionist Judaism as antisemitism, saying, "The detention of Yehonatan proves the absurdity of conflating anti-Zionism with antisemitism. Democrats and Republicans alike have attempted to denounce opponents of Israel as anti-Jewish, but here Trump has detained a rabbi through the High Holidays for his attendance at an anti-Israel protest three years ago. It is necessary to mobilize the working class against the escalating attack on free speech."

The federal lawsuit brought by Lee and Ovadia's other lawyers argues that the administration has taken an official position favoring one religious tendency within Judaism while punishing a follower of another. The government's action, the lawyers wrote, amounts to preferring "one religious position within Judaism and [penalizing] an adherent of another."

That formulation identifies the central constitutional issue. The state is not merely enforcing an immigration technicality. It is using discretionary immigration powers to punish a religious teacher for professing anti-Zionist Jewish beliefs and publicly opposing a mass atrocity.

Ovadia's prosecution belongs to a wider campaign against pro-Palestinian opponents of the Israeli war. Mahmoud Khalil, a lawful permanent resident and Columbia University graduate, was detained by ICE in March 2025 after playing a prominent role in campus protests against Israel's assault on Gaza.

The administration alleged that his lawful activity created adverse foreign policy consequences and promoted claims that he had participated in "antisemitic protests." Khalil remains free from federal custody but faces an active deportation order and the threat of rearrest**.**

Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish doctoral student at Tufts University, was seized by masked federal agents in Massachusetts in March 2025. Government records later indicated that officials had based her visa revocation solely on her co-authorship of a student newspaper opinion article, while DHS publicly claimed she had engaged in activity supporting Hamas. She was eventually released and completed her Ph.D. at Tufts University and returned to Turkey.

Momodou Taal, a British-Gambian Cornell doctoral student in Africana studies, was similarly threatened with detention and deportation after participating in pro-Palestinian activity. The administration and aligned right-wing organizations depicted campus protests as "antisemitic" or supportive of terrorism, conflating criticism of Israel with hostility toward Jews.

The lawsuit filed by Momodou Taal against the Trump administration was dismissed after a federal judge denied his motion to block his deportation, leading him to voluntarily self-deport from the United States back to Britain.

Trump's January 2025 executive order directed federal agencies to use "all available and appropriate legal tools" against what it called "antisemitism," including through removal proceedings against noncitizens. Administration officials then treated this mandate as authorization to investigate, arrest and threaten deportation against students and residents engaged in lawful opposition to Israeli policy.

The administration cannot claim that it is protecting Jews from a Jewish Hasidic father whose opposition to Israel is based on a longstanding religious tradition. Instead, it is seeking to criminalize and deport an opponent of Zionism while covering its tracks by denying Ovadia's request for a visa extension "as a matter of discretion."

The facts of this case expose the slander by the White House, Democrats and Republicans and corporate news media, who have all mounted a three-year, non-stop campaign to conflate the mass protests around the world in defense of Palestinian rights and against the Gaza genocide as "antisemitism."

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