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State Dept. demands 'enhanced' social media vetting of student visa applicants

It's tied to Trump's executive orders re: terrorism and antisemitism, per an official cable review by The Handbasket.



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(source)

Rumeysa Ozturk was approached by masked agents on Tuesday evening and shoved into an unmarked SUV. Ozturk is a Fulbright Scholar at Tufts University in



Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). As of Wednesday afternoon, no one knew where they took her. Not even her lawyer.

Ozturk's alleged crime isn't clear. All we know is that she was recently targeted by an organization called Canary Mission that exposes pro-Palestinian activists by posting their sensitive personal information. She's a member of Graduate Students for Palestine and co-wrote a [2024 op-ed](#) in the student newspaper with fellow organizers demanding that the University "acknowledge the Palestinian genocide, apologize for University President Sunil Kumar's statements, disclose its investments and divest from companies with direct or indirect ties to Israel."

Now The Handbasket has learned the US Department of State (DOS) has issued guidance that will make it easier to deny foreign students like Ozturk the ability to come study in the United States.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio sent out a cable to select department employees on Tuesday with the subject: "Action Request: Enhanced Screening and Social Media Vetting for Visa Applicants". The 1,700 word cable, a copy of which was shared with The Handbasket, outlines steps that foreign service officers in US embassies or consulates abroad must take while reviewing student visa applications.

"Effective immediately, consular officers must refer certain student and exchange visitor (F, M, and J) visa applicants to the Fraud Prevention Unit (FPU) for a mandatory social media check as described below," the cable reads. It then references a quote from Rubio on March 16th: "We don't want people in our country that are going to be committing crimes and undermining our national security or the public safety. It's that simple. Especially people that are here as guests. That is what a visa is... It is a visitor into our country. And if you violate the terms of your visitation, you are going to leave."

The cable is meant to force compliance with two Trump executive orders: [EO 14161](#), Protecting the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and



(The numerals used in the latter include Nazi references, something the administration has not confirmed, but which are nakedly evident to anyone with knowledge of the subject.) In addition to applicants they suspect of terrorist connections, it also instructs consulars to perform enhanced social media vetting for any applicants who previously held a student or exchange visa between October 7, 2023 and August 31, 2024, or had their visa terminated between October 7, 2023 and now.

“As part of screening every case for potential ineligibilities, consular officers **MUST ADDRESS** any derogatory information indicating that a visa applicant may be subject to the terrorism-related ineligibility grounds of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA),” the cable states. “This includes advocating for, sympathizing with, or persuading others to endorse or espouse terrorist activities or support a **DESIGNATED FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATION (FTO)**.”

The cable provides no specifics as to what types of posts would be categorized as such. It does, however, contain instructions for how to take screenshots of visa applicants’ social media profiles and where to store them as evidence in their case files.

Perhaps most alarming is the broadness with which it appears this standard will be applied. “Evidence suggesting a student visa applicant intends to travel to the United States to engage in unlawful activities clearly calls into question whether the applicant possesses intent and/or the ability to solely pursue a full course of study,” the cable states. But then it concedes that just because something isn’t *technically* “terrorist activity,” consulars can still use “that information in assessing the credibility of a visa applicant's claimed purpose of travel.”

Similarly in another section, it states that a student visa applicant doesn’t necessarily need to express explicit support for “terrorist activity” in order to be denied, but just that they demonstrate “a degree of public approval or public advocacy for terrorist activity or a terrorist organization.”



It goes on to say: “This may be evident in conduct that bears a hostile attitude toward U.S. citizens or U.S. culture (including government, institutions, or founding principles). Or it may be evident in advocacy or sympathy for foreign terrorist organizations. All of these matters may open lines of inquiry regarding the applicant's credibility and purpose of travel.”

DOS appears to admit here that they aren't just instructing consulars to search for pro-terrorism content on visa applicants' social platforms but that any whiff of opposition to a specific American person or issue can and should be used as a pretense to deny their application.

This standard may also apply to current student visa holders. While the cable recognizes that consulates do not have the authority to revoke visas, should they find evidence of current visa holders violating the new standards, they're instructed to contact the Visa Office in order to initiate review. That's standard to all visa revocations and not unique to this situation, a DOS employee confirmed to me.

"Pretty clear the immediate target is anyone who participated in pro-Palestinian protests—one of the triggers for social media screening is having been in the US on one of these visas between Oct. 7 and the end of last Aug," another DOS employee told me. "I think it's also vague/broad enough to apply however someone wants."

Recently the Trump administration "announced plans to more heavily scrutinize and review the social media accounts of immigrants applying for legal status, including U.S. citizenship, green cards and asylum," CBS News reported. Per the new plan, applicants would be required to submit their social media accounts to the government for review.

In the wake of the unlawful arrest and disappearance of former Columbia graduate student Mahmoud Khalil, international students who have engaged in First Amendment-protected protests are already on edge. And this intensified vetting process only stands to add another level of terror.

