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**Unmarked Vans. Secret Lists. Public Denunciations.
Our Police State Has Arrived.**

By M. Gessen

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“It’s the unmarked cars,” a friend who grew up under an Argentine dictatorship said. He had watched the [video](#) of the Columbia graduate student Mahmoud Khalil’s abduction. In the video, which Khalil’s wife recorded, she asks for the names of the men in plainclothes who handcuffed her husband.

“We don’t give our name,” one responds. “Can you please specify what agency is taking him?” she pleads. No response. We know now that Khalil was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency of the Department of Homeland Security.

Those of us who have lived in countries terrorized by a secret police force can’t shake a feeling of dreadful familiarity. “I never realized until this moment how much fear I carried with me from my childhood in Communist Romania,” another friend, the literary scholar Marianne Hirsch, told me. “Arrests were arbitrary and every time the doorbell rang, I started to shiver.”

It’s the catastrophic interruption of daily life, as when a Tufts University graduate student, Rumeysa Ozturk, was [grabbed](#) on a suburban street by half a dozen plainclothes agents, most of them masked. The security camera video of that arrest shows Ozturk walking, looking at her phone, perhaps to check the address where she was supposed to meet her friends for dinner that night, when an agent appears in front of her. She says something — asks something — struggling to control her voice, and within seconds she is handcuffed and placed in an unmarked car.

It’s the forced mass transports of immigrants. These are not even deportations, in the way we typically think of them. Rather than being sent to their country of origin, [Venezuelans](#) were sent to El Salvador, where they are being imprisoned, indefinitely, without due process. It’s the sight of men being marched in formation, their heads shaved, hundreds of people yanked from their individual lives to be reduced to an undifferentiated mass. It’s the sight, days later, of the secretary of homeland security posing against the background of men in cages and threatening more people with the same punishment.

It’s the growing irrelevance of the law and the helplessness of judges and lawyers. A federal judge ordered flights carrying the Venezuelan men to be turned around and demanded information about the abductees. Another federal judge forbade the

government to deport, without notice, Rasha Alawieh, the Brown University medical school professor who was detained on return from a trip to Lebanon. Another judge prohibited moving Rumeysa Ozturk from Massachusetts without notice. The executive branch apparently ignored these rulings.

It's the chilling stories that come by word of mouth. ICE is checking documents on the subway. ICE is outside New York public libraries that hold English-as-a-second-language classes. ICE agents handcuffed a U.S. citizen who tried to intervene in a detention in Harlem. ICE vehicles are parked outside Columbia. ICE is coming to your workplace, your street, your building. ICE agents are wearing brown uniforms that resemble those of UPS — don't open the door for deliveries. Don't leave the house. The streets in the New York neighborhoods with the highest immigrant populations have emptied out.

It's the invisible hand of the authorities. The media outlet Zeteo [reports](#) that Homeland Security employees are revoking foreign students' status in the database that's usually maintained by universities. (Normally, once a person has entered the country on a valid academic visa, they have the right to stay as long as they remain in the program for which the visa was granted — this is what university administrators track.) These changes have reportedly been made with no notification and in the absence of any transparent process. Of course, the Department of Homeland Security, when it was created in the wake of 9/11, was meant to function in opaque ways and with broad authority; it was [designed](#) to be a secret-police force. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has bragged to reporters about revoking the legal status of upward of 300 people and promised there would be more: "We're looking every day for these lunatics."

It's the shifting goal posts. They are taking not only people who are in the United States without legal status but also those who are here on a visitor's visa and then also legal permanent residents. They are targeting not only people who have criminal convictions but also those whom they say they suspect of belonging to a gang and also those who participated in or supported campus protests and then also someone, like Ozturk, who merely wrote, with three other people, an opinion essay in a student newspaper.

And then there was a German green card holder at Boston's Logan Airport who was [allegedly](#) stripped and deprived of sleep and his medications by Customs and Border Protection — actions that could fit the legal definition of torture. (The agency has denied the allegations.) And a Canadian with a job offer who was detained at the southern border and held for 12 days. And another German, a tourist, who was detained at the southern border and held for more than six weeks. And a Russian biomedical researcher at Harvard who was detained coming back from France and has been in the infamous detention facility in Louisiana for over a month.

It's the way we dig down for the details of these stories to reassure ourselves that this

won't happen to us, or that there is some logic to these arrests. The German man had a misdemeanor charge a decade ago. The Canadian was possibly using a crossing not meant for people submitting work visa applications. The other German, a tattoo artist, was [carrying her equipment](#) and customs agents might have suspected that she was planning to work illegally. The Russian scientist was bringing in frog embryos that the Department of Homeland Security says she did not declare properly. When the range of factors that can get a person arrested stretches from political speech to a paperwork error, we are in territory described by the Russian saying, "Give us a person and we'll find the infraction."

And, as the historian Timothy Snyder has [pointed out](#), if due process is routinely denied to noncitizens, it will be denied to citizens too, simply because it is often impossible for people to prove that they are citizens. This has happened before, when an unknown number of U.S. citizens were caught up in the deportations of hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans in the late 1920s and 1930s.

It's the lists. More than anything else, in fact, it's the lists. A private company has launched an app called ICERAID, billed as a "protocol that delegates intelligence-gathering tasks to citizens that would otherwise be undertaken by law enforcement agencies." The app promises rewards for "capturing and uploading images of criminal illegal alien activity" and possibly even bigger rewards for self-reporting — for adding oneself to the ICERAID registry if one is "an honest, hard-working undocumented immigrant with no criminal history." The app, in other words, combines two time-tested secret-police techniques: incentivizing some people to denounce their neighbors and inducing others to add themselves to registries.

It's the denunciations by concerned citizens. Before there was ICERAID, there were several groups compiling lists of people they consider antisemitic, especially university students and faculty. These organizations include Mothers Against College Antisemitism, a Facebook group with more than 60,000 members; Betar U.S., a Zionist organization so extreme-right that the Anti-Defamation League has denounced it; and [several other groups](#) that, since the beginning of Donald Trump's second term, have been reporting people to government authorities and cheering when they are detained, deported or fired. When Rubio was [asked](#) if the State Department is using lists fed to it by these private groups, he said, "We're not going to talk about the process by which we're identifying it because obviously we're looking for more people."

The state appears to have outsourced surveillance. A Columbia professor shared an Instagram story by the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei that showed Elon Musk's "X" symbol rotating and morphing into a swastika. The professor did it on personal time, from a personal residence, to a personal account. An Instagram story lives only for 24 hours; someone was watching. It was reported to the university; three months passed

before the professor was cleared. Then the professor's name and picture, along with a new inventory of ostensible offenses, popped up on one of those lists of supposedly antisemitic faculty members. There was, of course, nothing antisemitic about the Instagram story or the rest of it. The professor, like so many of the people on these lists, is Jewish.

Last Friday, mere minutes after Columbia announced the name of its new interim president, Claire Shipman, an entity that calls itself Documenting Jew Hatred on Campus [addressed](#) Shipman on X: "We have identified faculty members" who, the group believes, should be purged. The self-appointed enforcers are vigilant. This, too, is a hallmark of a secret-police state.

The citizens of such a state live with a feeling of being constantly watched. They live with a sense of random danger. Anyone — a passer-by, the man behind you in line at the deli, the woman who lives down the hall, your building's super, your own student, your child's teacher — can be a plainclothes agent or a self-appointed enforcer. People live in growing isolation and with the feeling of low-level dread, and these are the defining conditions of living in a secret-police state. People lose the ability to plan for the future, because they feel that they have no control over their lives, and they try to make themselves invisible. They move through the world without looking, for fear of seeing too much.

But while we are still capable of looking, we have to say what we see: The United States has become a secret-police state. Trust me, I've seen it before.