

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 22, 2025

The Honorable Kristi Noem
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20528

Todd M. Lyons
Acting Director
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
500 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Secretary Noem and Acting Director Lyons:

The recent apprehension in Somerville, Massachusetts of Rûmeysa Öztürk, a Turkish national and fifth-year doctoral student at Tufts University, by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and her subsequent transfer to an ICE detention facility in Louisiana, raises serious questions about the fairness and integrity of our immigration enforcement system. Based on news reports and court filings, the evidence suggests that ICE did not transfer Öztürk to a Louisiana detention facility due to a lack of bed space in New England, as the government has claimed, but instead deliberately relocated her to a jurisdiction more favorable to the Trump administration's deportation agenda. We demand answers about this apparent judicial forum shopping.

On March 25, 2025, six plainclothes ICE agents wearing masks to conceal their faces arrested Öztürk near her residence in Somerville, Massachusetts, as she was walking to an Iftar dinner.¹ Surveillance footage shows that the agents surrounded her without immediately identifying themselves, handcuffed her, placed her in an unmarked vehicle, and moved her on a circuitous route through Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, before placing her on a flight to Louisiana the following morning.² Her legal team, unaware of her location at the time, filed a *habeas* petition in U.S. District Court in the District of Massachusetts at 10:02 p.m. the night she was detained, but by then she had already begun her journey out of the state.³ Öztürk's counsel, family, and friends were unable to locate the student for more than 20 hours after her arrest, despite multiple inquiries by Öztürk's counsel to the government.

¹ Nick Stoico & John R. Ellement, *A timeline of how the arrest of a Tufts student by federal agents unfolded, and where the case stands*, Boston Globe (Apr. 2, 2025), https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/03/31/metro/tufts-student-arrested-by-ice-timeline/?p1=BGSearch_Overlay_Results&p1=Article_Inline_Text_Link.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

ICE has claimed there was no bed space available for Öztürk in New England. But officials at various jails in the region that contract with ICE have stated otherwise. The Cumberland County Jail in Portland, Maine, had 198 available beds.⁴ The Strafford County Jail in Dover, New Hampshire, also had capacity of more than 100 beds, including at least 16 open beds for female detainees.⁵ Other facilities in the region that house female detainees include the Wyatt Detention Facility in Rhode Island and the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility in Vermont.⁶ According to a Massachusetts immigration lawyer, ICE is also able to hold female detainees for short-term or overnight detention in its local offices, including at the ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (“ERO”) Boston Field Office in Burlington, Massachusetts.⁷ Yet, ICE asserts that no bed space was available anywhere in the region, raising serious questions about whether the agency is intentionally misrepresenting facts to justify strategic relocations.

In court filings, immigration lawyers described ICE’s treatment of Öztürk as irregular, declaring they had never seen or heard of an ICE detainee arrested in Massachusetts be so quickly shuttled out of Massachusetts and to multiple separate locations.⁸ This quick movement—coupled with the government’s delayed notice regarding a detainee’s whereabouts—risks frustrating the filing of *habeas* petitions.

The government has since argued that Öztürk’s legal challenge must be heard in Louisiana, within the Fifth Circuit, where she is currently detained—a jurisdiction known for its strict immigration rulings. According to Mary Yanik, a clinical associate professor of law at Tulane University, in Louisiana the majority of ICE detention centers are within the jurisdiction of Louisiana’s Western District, which is the “slowest moving” of the district courts in the state, very conservative, and whose release of detainees by formal order is “exceedingly rare.”⁹ Decisions from federal district courts and immigration courts in Louisiana can eventually be appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, which the Center for American Progress has described as “arguably the most right-wing federal appellate court in the country.”¹⁰ Legal experts and immigrant rights advocates have noted a troubling pattern in which ICE transfers detainees to jurisdictions with stricter immigration enforcement—such as Louisiana—thereby increasing the likelihood of deportation and limiting detainees’ access to legal representation and family support.¹¹

⁴ Samantha J. Gross, *Detained Tufts graduate student Rümeysa Öztürk was one of several sent by ICE to Louisiana. Here’s why.*, Boston Globe (Apr. 2, 2025), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/04/02/metro/tufts-student-arrest-louisiana-ice-detention-2/?p1=Article Inline Related Box>.

⁵ *Id.*; Pet’r’s Reply Br. Am. Pet. for Writ of Habeas Corpus and Compl. Ex. 5, *Öztürk v. Trump*, No. 25-cv-10695 (D. Mass. Apr. 2, 2025).

⁶ Pet’r’s Reply Br. Am. Pet. for Writ of Habeas Corpus and Compl. Ex. 3, *Öztürk v. Trump*, No. 25-cv-10695 (D. Mass. Apr. 2, 2025).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*, Exs. 3-6.

⁹ Ivana Saric, *Why the Trump administration wants to try immigration cases in Louisiana*, Axios (Mar. 27, 2025), <https://www.axios.com/2025/03/27/trump-immigration-louisiana-5th-circuit>.

¹⁰ Jeevna Sheth & Devon Ombres, *The 5th Circuit Court of Appeals Is Spearheading a Judicial Power Grab*, CAP (May 15, 2024), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-5th-circuit-court-of-appeals-is-spearheading-a-judicial-power-grab/>.

¹¹ See Daniella Silva, *Detained immigrant students sent to remote Louisiana facilities accused of human rights abuses*, NBC News (Apr. 1, 2025), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ice-student-detainees-louisiana->

Further compounding concerns, Öztürk is currently being held at the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center in Basile, Louisiana—a facility operated by the for-profit GEO Group, rather than the federal government. Numerous reports, including a 2024 review by Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and others, have documented human rights abuses at ICE detention centers in Louisiana, including medical neglect, unsanitary conditions, and lack of access to legal resources.¹² These organizations have described these facilities as “a black hole,” given their remote locations and limited transparency. Öztürk herself has experienced asthma attacks while in the Louisiana detention center and lacked access to medications.

Öztürk is not alone. At least two other students—Mahmoud Khalil of Columbia University and Alireza Doroudi of the University of Alabama—have also been arrested and transferred to remote detention centers in Louisiana.¹³ ICE detained all three students near their homes and swiftly relocated them to a state where immigration rulings are more likely to favor the government. These actions suggest a systematic effort by ICE to remove individuals from their communities and place them in legal environments where their rights are more difficult to defend.

In light of these serious concerns about ICE’s conduct, we request written responses to the following questions by May 6, 2025:

1. What specific criteria led ICE to determine that no bed space was available for Öztürk in New England?
2. Why was Öztürk transported to New Hampshire and Vermont before being flown to Louisiana, rather than being placed in a nearby facility in Massachusetts? Why was Öztürk transported to three separate locations in three different states before being flown to Louisiana?
3. When was the decision made to transport Öztürk to Louisiana? Who made this decision? What steps and protocols were undertaken in this decision-making process?
4. What is the total cost incurred by the government for Öztürk’s transportation from her arrest to her arrival in Louisiana, including flights and other logistical expenses?
5. Did the jurisdictional implications of placing Öztürk in Louisiana, within a federal judicial circuit known for its pro-government immigration rulings, factor into ICE’s decision to transfer her there?
6. What policies and procedures are in place to prevent forum shopping by ICE in detainee transfers?
7. Given the documented history of abuse and inadequate legal access at ICE detention facilities in Louisiana, what justifications does ICE have for continuing to send detainees there?

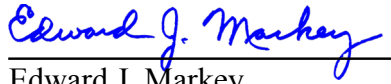
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¹² Sarah Decker & Anthony Enriquez, *Inside the Black Hole, Systematic Human Rights Abuses Against Immigrants Disappeared & Detained in Louisiana*, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights (Aug. 2024), https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/66324b38260b26fc98b4f52f/66c77c4848f4fc74670650f5_Inside%20the%20Black%20Hole_Systemic%20Human%20Rights%20Abuses%20Against%20Immigrants%20Detained.pdf.

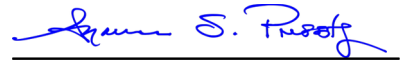
¹³ Eduardo Cuevas, *University of Alabama doctoral student detained by ICE amid Trump crackdown on visas*, USA Today (Mar. 27, 2025), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2025/03/27/ice-detains-alireza-doroudi-university-of-alabama-doctoral-student/82685586007/>.

The transfer and detention of Ms. Öztürk—along with other students—raises urgent concerns about due process, transparency, and judicial forum shopping, threatening to undermine public trust in our immigration system. We urge your prompt and thorough response to these inquiries.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator