

Protesters arrested after storming Trump Tower in New York City to demand release of Mahmoud Khalil



New York, March 14 (RHC)-- Nearly 100 people were arrested after protesters gathered at Trump Tower in Manhattan Thursday to denounce the arrest of Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian activist detained by ICE over his involvement with pro-Palestinian demonstrations at Columbia University.

The protest, organized by Jewish Voice for Peace, began shortly after noon when demonstrators dressed in red shirts that read "Not in our Name" and "Jews Say Stop Arming Israel," crammed into the Tower's iconic golden atrium.

They chanted "Free Mahmoud Khalil" and unfurled banners that read "Never Again for Anyone" and "Jews Say Do Not Comply." Ninety-eight people were later arrested and 50 were led from the lobby in zip ties and placed into awaiting police vehicles, according to the New York Police Department. No injuries or property damage was reported, the NYPD said.

An organizer livestreamed the protest from the balcony overlooking the atrium of Trump Tower. "As Jews, we're here today, mere hours before the holiday of Purim begins – a holiday where we honor Esther who used her voice to speak out and demand that the king not commit genocide," the woman said in the video. "Today we are using her same courage to speak out."

As the NYPD moved in to arrest the demonstrators, they sat in unison and began chanting, "Free Palestine," and "the whole world is watching."

The protest comes days after Khalil was detained by federal agents at his home in New York after the Trump administration revoked his green card. In a post on Truth Social Monday, Trump wrote, "If you support terrorism your presence is contrary to our national and foreign policy interests, and you are not welcome here."

It also comes as Columbia University says it has expelled, suspended or temporarily revoked the degrees of students who barricaded themselves in Hamilton Hall in April 2024.

Last spring, Columbia University Apartheid Divest demanded the university divest from its financial ties to Israel and a call for ceasefire in Gaza. After the university missed its deadline to reach an agreement on divestment, students and people unaffiliated with the school entered Columbia's Hamilton Hall and barricaded themselves inside. The university requested police assistance to remove the protesters and more than 110 people were arrested, according to the NYPD.

It's unclear how many students were suspended or expelled for their involvement in the barricade. A university spokesperson told CNN they cannot confirm how many students were suspended or expelled "due to student privacy obligations."

Khalil's case, the first of its kind, sets the stage for what could come as the Trump administration ramps up its targeting of foreign students and pro-Palestinian demonstrations on college campuses.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations on Thursday filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of Khalil and seven other students against Columbia University and Barnard College for allegedly agreeing to disclose thousands of private student records to the House Education and Workforce Committee under threat of losing "billions" in federal funding.

On February 13, the House Education and Workforce Committee sent a letter demanding that Columbia University and Barnard College produce all student disciplinary records relating to 11 incidents, the lawsuit states. A February 27 email from Columbia University stated it would turn over the records demanded by the committee, according to the suit.

CAIR said disclosing students' records could expose them to harassment, doxxing, threats to their safety and reputational harm.

Khalil's attorney has said the U.S. government "retaliated" against her client "for speaking up in defense of Palestinians" and that he has been detained for exercising his right to free speech.

Khalil is currently being detained at an ICE facility in Louisiana. On Wednesday, a judge ruled he would remain in custody while his case continues. His wife, Noor Abdalla, is eight months pregnant and a United States citizen.

A Palestinian refugee who grew up in Syria, Khalil was attending graduate school at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023. After students began protesting at the university, Khalil was tapped to represent a coalition of student groups in discussions with the school's administrators.

He told CNN last spring that he felt called to speak out on behalf of his people. "I always say that we are the lucky ones that made it here to speak for our people who are under oppression in Palestine and across the refugee camps and the Palestinian cities," Khalil said.

Juliette Kayyem, a CNN senior national security analyst, said the protest at Trump Tower mirrors those that have targeted Elon Musk's Tesla dealerships in recent days and shows the unique challenges the Trump administration faces in securing government and private interests.

"They are dealing with, I think in some ways, the consequences of that merger of monetization and policy and the First Amendment," Kayyem told CNN's Brianna Keilar on Thursday.

Sonya Meyerson-Knox, communications director for Jewish Voice for Peace, said the group of 300 demonstrators hatched the plan to protest inside Trump Tower a day and a half ago. She told CNN they felt called to protest Khalil's arrest because "we know our history and we are here to say 'never again.'"

"I am here in adherence to what my ancestors taught me because I have been taught what happens when authoritarian regimes start scapegoating people," Meyerson-Knox said. "And I know that if we don't speak up today, we will not be able to speak up."

[SOURCE: CNN and NEWS AGENCIES]

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