

Trump administration reviews billions in Harvard contracts and grants

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Washington, April 1 (RHC)-- The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has announced it will undertake a “comprehensive review” of federal contracts with Harvard University, as part of its crackdown on anti-Semitism in the United States.

But critics fear the prestigious Ivy League university is the latest target in a purge of pro-Palestinian voices.

On Monday, three departments under Trump's control — the Department of Education, the General Services Administration and the Health and Human Services Department — issued a press release saying that \$255.6 million in Harvard contracts and \$8.7 billion in multi-year grants are slated to come under the microscope.

"Harvard has served as a symbol of the American Dream for generations," Secretary of Education Linda McMahon said in a statement. "Harvard's failure to protect students on campus from anti-Semitic discrimination — all while promoting divisive ideologies over free inquiry — has put its reputation in serious jeopardy."

The announcement follows similar actions taken against another private Ivy League campus, Columbia University in New York, which saw millions in contracts revoked. The Ivy League — and Columbia in particular — were an epicentre of pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the U.S., after Israel launched a war against Gaza in October 2023.

Student encampments on Columbia's lawn in April and May 2024 inspired similar protests around the country, as campus activists denounced school ties to Israel and called for an end to human rights abuses in Gaza.

Human rights groups and experts at the United Nations have accused Israel of using tactics consistent with genocide in the Palestinian territory.

The organizers behind the campus protesters have largely rejected accusations of anti-Semitism, arguing that being critical of Israel's government is not the same as spreading anti-Jewish hate. They have likened attempts to smear their protests as a form of censorship, designed to dampen free speech.

But critics have accused the protesters of creating an unsafe learning environment. There have also been isolated reports of anti-Jewish attacks, including the alleged assault of one 24-year-old Columbia student who was hanging pro-Israel flyers in October 2023.

Still, the protests have been, by and large, peaceful. And free-speech experts have denounced the Trump administration as blowing accusations of anti-Semitism out of proportion in order to exercise control over top universities.

In the case of Columbia University, the Trump administration stripped the school of \$400 million in grants and contracts on March 7th, effective immediately. It accused Columbia of allowing "relentless violence, intimidation, and anti-Semitic harassment" on its campus.

A week later, on March 13th, the Trump administration issued a list of demands Columbia would need to comply with to earn back the \$400 million. They included banning face masks, ensuring law enforcement could arrest "agitators" on campus, and adopting a controversial definition of anti-Semitism that could include criticism of Israel.

The Trump administration also called for the Department of Middle East, South Asian and African Studies to be placed under the control of an external "receivership". Critics denounced the measures as an attempt to corrode academic freedom. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) called the administration's move "a blueprint to supercharge campus censorship".

"The letter goes far beyond what is appropriate for the government to mandate and will chill campus discourse," the organisation wrote in a statement. "Civil rights investigations should not be handled through ad hoc directives from the government."

But the U.S. has long been an ally of Israel's since the country's founding, and the Trump administration has backed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ongoing campaign in Gaza, even proposing that the US "take over" and "own" the Palestinian territory — turning it into a "riviera of the Middle East."

Critics said Trump's proposal amounted to a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians who call Gaza home.

On March 22nd, Columbia University agreed to comply with most of Trump's demands. The Trump administration touted those concessions as a victory in its news release announcing the review of Harvard's federal contracts. It also indicated that Harvard has signalled it would cooperate with Trump's priorities.

"We are pleased that Harvard is willing to engage with us on these goals," Sean Keveney of the Health and Human Services Department said in the statement. But the announcement that Harvard was the next school to be singled out comes on the heels of an open letter from its law school, one of the oldest in the nation.

More than 90 professors signed the document, which denounces actions taken to "punish people for lawfully speaking out on matters of public concern".

While the letter does not mention Trump or the pro-Palestinian protesters outright, its publication comes after students have been arrested for deportation as the result of their activism.

The letter does, however, make note of attempts to "threaten law firms and legal clinics" for their legal work or prior government services — a reference to actions Trump has taken.

Trump, for example, has issued executive orders punishing firms like San Francisco's Perkins Coie LLP, which represented his 2016 election rival Hillary Clinton, and he has fired career prosecutors at the Department of Justice.

The Harvard Law professors warned this violates the constitutional right to free speech — and creates an atmosphere of fear. "Whatever we might each think about particular conduct under particular facts, we share a conviction that our Constitution, including its First Amendment, was designed to make dissent and debate possible without fear of government punishment," the letter reads. "Neither a law school nor a society can properly function amidst such fear."

Still, the Trump administration pledged "swift action" if Harvard failed to comply with its demands. "We mean business," Secretary McMahon posted on social media.

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and NEWS AGENCIES]

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