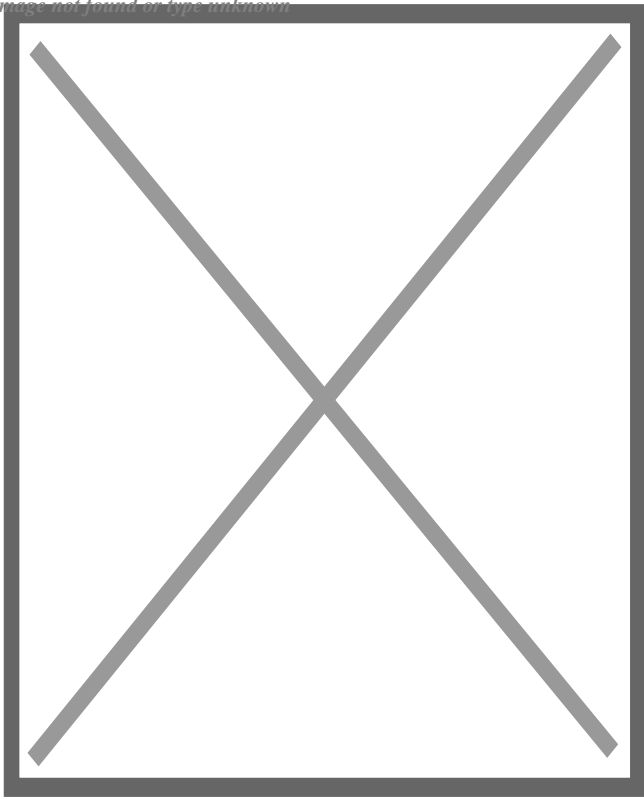


Rallies in Washington, DC demand release of detained Georgetown scholar

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Washington, May 2 (RHC)-- “Free him now. Free him now.” Those words rang outside a federal courthouse near Washington, DC, on Thursday, as lawyers argued over the case of Badar Khan Suri, who has been detained by the United States government over his support for Palestinian rights.

Dozens of activists had gathered to show solidarity with Khan Suri, a postdoctoral scholar at Georgetown University. He was arrested in March as part of President Donald Trump’s campaign to punish and deport non-citizens accused of fuelling “anti-Semitism” and “illegal protests” on college campuses.

Speaking to the crowd in Alexandria, Virginia, Mapheze Saleh – Khan Suri’s Palestinian American wife – highlighted the impact of his detention on their three children. She said they just wanted their father back.

“Why is this happening to him? Why is the Trump administration persecuting him?” Saleh said. “Because he fell in love and married to a Palestinian, because he dared to express his belief in non-violence and because he spoke out bravely against the genocide of my people in Gaza.”

Before his detention, Khan Suri was in the U.S. on an academic visa, conducting research on peace-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the U.S. government has accused Khan Suri, an Indian national, of violating the terms of his visa by “actively spreading Hamas propaganda and promoting antisemitism on social media”. It has not offered proof of either assertion.

Outside the courthouse on Thursday, Amanda Eisenhour, an activist from Alexandria, said Khan Suri’s case represents the intersection of issues including free speech, constitutional rights and the “tyranny” of the US immigration system.

“It’s also about Palestine,” Eisenhour told Al Jazeera. “I want to make sure that’s always part of the conversation. Dr Khan Suri is a political prisoner because of his association, because of his marriage to somebody who’s Palestinian. We’re now a country that holds political prisoners, and we have to be ready to fight against that.”

As the legal hearing unfolded, activists outside chanted for Khan Suri’s freedom and Palestinian rights under a statue of a blindfolded woman holding scales, symbolising justice without bias. One protester held up a sign, “Mob bosses disappear people.” Another placard proclaimed, “Due process now.”

In the courtroom, lawyers for both sides questioned the geographical divide between where the hearing was taking place – and where Khan Suri is held presently. After his arrest in Virginia, immigration officials quickly moved Khan Suri from a local detention centre to one in Louisiana and then in Texas.

Critics say the government has transferred individuals slated for deportation to faraway states to keep them away from their families and legal teams. They also point out that states like Louisiana and Texas are more likely to have conservative-leaning courts.

On Thursday, Khan Suri’s lawyers argued for the scholar to be moved back to his home state of Virginia, where his case is currently unfolding.

“We hope the court sees through these unlawful government tactics, keeps Dr Suri’s case here in Virginia, orders that he be released or, at minimum, orders that he be returned to Virginia, where he’ll be close to his legal counsel and to his family,” said Samah Sisay, staff lawyer at the Center for Constitutional Rights, which is involved in the case.

But the Trump administration made an opposing request, pushing for the court case to be transferred to Texas. Ultimately, Judge Patricia Tolliver Giles demanded answers about why Khan Suri was moved so swiftly out of Virginia. She gave the government’s lawyers 24 hours to respond.

The Georgetown scholar’s lawyers have reason to be optimistic about the outcome. Federal district courts have asserted jurisdiction in similar cases, and on Wednesday, a judge in Vermont ordered the release of Columbia University student Mohsen Mahdawi, who is also facing deportation.

Since Trump began his second term in January, Secretary of State Marco Rubio has suggested that he revoked the visas of hundreds of foreign students who engaged in protests or criticism of Israel. But the push to deport Khan Suri has been one of the most prominent cases.

To justify removing Khan Suri and other student activists, Rubio has cited the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, a Cold War-era law. One rarely used provision allows the secretary of state to deport non-citizens who pose “potentially serious adverse foreign consequences” for the US.

The Trump administration has not charged Khan Suri with a crime. But officials have accused him of “connections to a known or suspected terrorist”: his father-in-law.

“Suri was married to the daughter of a senior advisor for to [sic] Hamas terrorist group,” the Department of Homeland Security said in a social media post. But Khan Suri’s supporters point out that his father-in-law, Ahmed Yousef, has not been associated with Hamas for years and has even criticised the group on multiple occasions.

Yousef had served more than a decade ago as an adviser to former Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, a Hamas leader who was killed by Israel in Iran last year.

Regardless, legal experts say familial ties are not a criminal offence or grounds for deportation. Hassan Ahmad, a Virginia-based lawyer representing Khan Suri, said the allegation about the Georgetown scholar’s father-in-law sets the case apart from the push to deport other pro-Palestine students.

“We’re talking not just about the First Amendment, freedom of speech. We’re talking about the constitutional freedom of association as well,” Ahmad said.

“And that’s something that distinguishes Dr Suri’s case, in that here they’re going after him based on not anything that he said or retweeted or forwarded or liked or spoke to anyone [about], but based only on his association. That’s not the America we want to be.”

Eden Heilman, the legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Virginia, which is helping to represent Khan Suri, also said deporting someone based on their personal connections is a “very scary premise”.

“If that’s what the government has done, which they are alleging they are doing with Dr Suri, we are in an unprecedented time in terms of our constitutional threats,” Heilman told reporters on Thursday.

Moreover, social media accounts that appear to belong to Khan Suri do not show any direct support for Hamas or hostility towards the Jewish people. Instead, the scholar has used his social media presence to decry Israeli atrocities in Gaza and highlight apparent war crimes against Palestinians.

“Israel is bombing hospitals in Gaza to turn the land inhabitable, in order to build the case for making Palestinians in Gaza think of migrating to the Sinai desert,” Khan Suri wrote in October 2023.

In recent months, Trump has called for the removal of all Palestinians from Gaza, a plan that rights advocates say amounts to ethnic cleansing. Democratic Congressman Don Beyer, who represents a district in northern Virginia where Khan Suri lived, attended Thursday’s hearing to show support.

“I’ll be doing everything I can to help Dr Khan [Suri] and his family, and I encourage each one of us to do all that we can to tell these stories, to help educate the American people about what’s happening in this threat to our Constitution, to our rights,” Beyer said in a video message on Thursday.

“It is Kafkaesque that somebody can be kidnapped without reason, without acknowledgement, without logic, without charges and taken off to be locked in a prison in Texas, not knowing what happens next.”

Anita Martineau, a Northern Virginia resident, told Al Jazeera people should not be “kidnapped” for their speech. She attended a protest outside the hearing, holding a poster that read, “Bring Khan Suri back now.”

“It’s absolutely unconstitutional, and it needs to stop,” Martineau said. “American people and anyone in this country, whether they’re citizens or residents, they all need to stand up. We need to speak with one voice.”

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