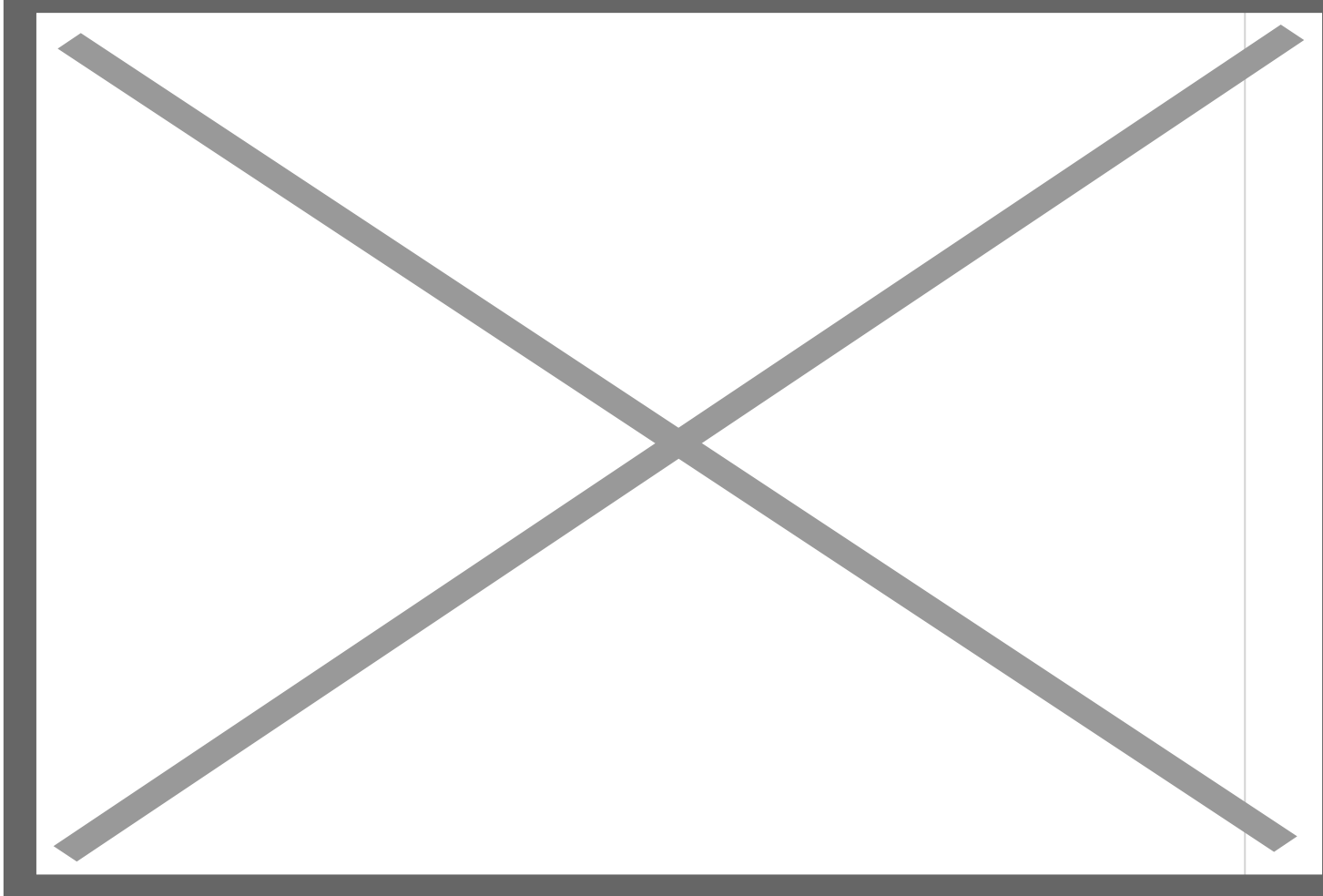


Student protester Mohsen Mahdawi unveils legal defense fund for immigrants

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Mohsen Mahdawi speaks during a news conference at the Vermont State House on May 8 [Alex Driehaus/AP Photo]

Mahdawi was recently released after being arrested as part of President Donald Trump's

crackdown on student protesters

Burlington, May 9 (RHC)-- Student protest leader Mohsen Mahdawi has appeared at the Vermont state house to help launch a legal defence fund to help immigrants like himself who are facing deportation hearings.

His appearance on Thursday comes nearly a week after Mahdawi himself was released from immigration detention, after spending nearly 16 days in custody for his pro-Palestinian advocacy.

The administration of President Donald Trump has sought to deport Mahdawi and other student activists for their demonstrations, citing a Cold War-era law that allows the removal of foreign nationals deemed to have adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States.

Though released on bail, Mahdawi continues to face deportation proceedings. He reflected on his time behind bars at a news conference where he and state officials announced the Vermont Immigration Legal Defense Fund.

“I was unjustly kidnapped or detained, if you want to go by the legal term,” Mahdawi said with a wry smile. “And without the support and the love that I received from the people of Vermont – Vermonters and the representatives of the people in Vermont – I may not have been here today among you.”

Mahdawi entered the national spotlight as a leader in the student protests at Columbia University, an Ivy League school in New York City that has been at the forefront of pro-Palestinian advocacy.

A legal permanent resident of the U.S., Mahdawi himself is Palestinian and grew up in the Far’a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. He has publicly described the oppression he said he experienced there, including the deaths of family members and friends at the hands of the Israeli military.

Since Israel launched its war in Gaza on October 7, 2023, Mahdawi has been outspoken in his opposition to the military campaign.

As an undergraduate at Columbia, he helped found student groups like Dar: The Palestinian Student Society and Columbia University Apartheid Divest. The latter has taken a lead role in protesting ties between the school and organisations involved with Israel and its military activities.

But President Trump has described such protests as “illegal” and pledged to crack down on non-citizen participants.

On March 8th, Mahdawi’s colleague at Dar, Mahmoud Khalil, was the first student protester to be taken into custody for his role in the nationwide student protest movement. Others have since been detained, including Tufts University doctoral student Rumeysa Ozturk, who supporters say did little more than write an op-ed about the war in Gaza.

Just over a month later, on April 14th, Mahdawi arrived at an appointment in Colchester, Vermont, ostensibly for his U.S. citizenship application. Immigration officers, however, were waiting on site to arrest him, and he was led away in handcuffs.

Mahdawi was accused of no crime. The Trump administration, however, has accused him of harassing Jewish students and leading “pro-Hamas protests”, though it has not offered evidence to support those allegations.

“His rhetoric on the war in Israel proves his terrorist sympathies,” a recent document from the Department of Homeland Security said.

Mahdawi's detention galvanised Vermont politicians on both sides of the political spectrum. Governor Phil Scott, a Republican, called on the federal government to release any evidence it had that Mahdawi was a threat to national security and denounced the surreptitious manner of his arrest.

"What cannot be justified is how this action was undertaken. Law enforcement officers in this country should not operate in the shadows or hide behind masks," Scott wrote in a press release. "The power of the executive branch of the federal government is immense, but it is not infinite, and it is not absolute."

Meanwhile, Senator Peter Welch, a Democrat, visited Mahdawi behind bars at Vermont's Northwest State Correctional Facility in an effort to raise awareness about his case.

Ultimately, on April 30, a federal district court deemed that Mahdawi was no flight risk and released him on bail, warning that the government's actions could be interpreted as an attempt to "shut down debate".

In his public appearance on Thursday, Mahdawi thanked his fellow Vermonters for showing him support and called on the state to act as an example to others.

"Home is where you feel safe and loved. And those who surround you, they are your people, and you are my people," he told the crowd. "This is a message of hope and light that our humanity is much larger than what divide us. Our humanity is much larger than unjust laws. Our humanity is much larger than being Democrat or Republican, Black or white, in a city or in rural area."

Mahdawi also described how, when he was in detention, he saw an undocumented farm worker praying on his knees each night before going to sleep. "I think his prayers have been answered today by this initiative," Mahdawi said of the legal defence fund.

The fund's organisers said they hope to raise \$1 million to "build a lasting safety net" for immigrant families in Vermont. That sum, they said, would fund training and hiring legal staff to respond to what they described as an immigration "crisis."

"Vermont is going to take action to ensure no one faces deportation, detention or family separation alone and unrepresented," said State Senator Kesha Ram Hinsdale. "This will be embedded in our civic infrastructure in a way we have not achieved before and we hope will have long-term benefits beyond this immediate crisis."

Vermont State Treasurer Mike Pieciak added that the fund would ensure justice is not solely reserved for those who can afford it. "This effort is not about politics. This effort is about principle," he said. "The fundamental right to due process means very little if somebody cannot access legal representation, especially when they're navigating a system as complex and as high stakes as the U.S. immigration law."

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and ASSOCIATED PRESS]

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