

Columbia University student Mohsen Mahdawi snatched by federal agents

Kevin Reed
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On Monday, Columbia University student and green card holder Mohsen Mahdawi was snatched by federal agents after he reported to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Colchester, Vermont, for an interview as part of his application to become a naturalized citizen.

In a video posted to X by Christopher Helali, Mahdawi is seen being escorted out of the building in handcuffs by hooded federal agents, one of whom is identified on his jacket as with Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), and placed in an SUV and then driven off the premises in a caravan of unmarked vehicles.

Mahdawi was a leading figure during the pro-Palestine student protests at Columbia University through the spring of 2024. After this, he said he took a step back to focus on building bridges with Jewish and Israeli communities on campus. He is scheduled to graduate from Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs in the fall of 2025.

Mahdawi, who is in his mid-30s, grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. His childhood was shaped by the Second Intifada (uprising) in 2000-2005 against the Zionist occupation of the Palestinian territories. He experienced significant personal loss, including the shooting death of his best friend during a confrontation with Israeli soldiers when he was 10 years old.

More recently, Mahdawi lost two cousins in the growing violence in the occupied Palestinian territories since Israel launched the Gaza genocide after October 7, 2023. His aunts and uncles' homes have been destroyed and his father's store was blown up as part of the violence in the West Bank city of Jenin.

In 2023, Mahdawi co-founded the Palestinian Student Union ("Dar") at Columbia University, which "serves to engage with and celebrate Palestinian culture, history, and identity." He co-founded this organization with Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian lawful permanent resident who was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in March and is being held at a detention facility in Louisiana for his outspoken opposition to the Gaza genocide and defense of Palestinian rights.

According to a report by The Intercept, after his transport away from the Colchester, Vermont immigration office, ICE began the deportation process to return Mahdawi back to the West Bank. As of 4:30 p.m., the *Guardian* reported that Mahdawi's attorney, Luna Droubi, said, "We have not received confirmation as to his whereabouts despite numerous attempts to locate him."

"Mohsen Mahdawi was unlawfully detained today for no reason other than his Palestinian identity," Droubi said in a statement to The Intercept. "He came to this country hoping to be free to speak out about the atrocities he has witnessed, only to be punished for such speech."

Mahdawi's lawyers filed a habeas corpus petition on Monday morning in US District Court in Vermont against President Donald Trump, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and others, challenging the legality of his detention. The motion alleges the government is violating Mahdawi's statutory and due process rights by punishing him for speech related to Palestine and Israel.

The motion states, in part:

Prior to and following Mr. Mahdawi's detention, the government has made clear that it intends to retaliate and punish individuals such as Mr. Mahdawi who advocated for ceasefire and ending the bloodshed in Gaza. Respondents' actions plainly violate the First Amendment, which protects Mr. Mahdawi's right to speak on matters of public concern and prevents the government from chilling constitutionally-protected speech.

Responding to the habeas corpus petition, US District Court Judge William K. Sessions III imposed a temporary restraining order blocking the White House from deporting Mahdawi from the US or removing him from the jurisdiction of the Vermont district court pending further review.

According to emails reviewed by The Intercept, when his friend Khalil was abducted and disappeared on March 8, Mahdawi contacted Columbia University administrators and asked them to help him find a safe place to live so he would not be taken away by ICE agents. He said the school did nothing in response.

Mahdawi also told The Intercept that deporting him back to the West Bank is essentially a death sentence by the US government, “because my people are being killed unjustly in an indiscriminate way.” He added, “This is the outcome. I will be either living or imprisoned or killed by the apartheid system.”

Mohsen Mahdawi is the ninth Columbia University student targeted for deportation by the US State Department, among hundreds across the country who have had their visas revoked under the Trump administration’s sweeps and abductions of immigrants. His is one of the few cases of legal permanent residents who have been arrested where the government is seeking to cancel his green card instead of revoking his student visa.

A study published by *Inside Higher Ed* beginning on April 8 says, as of Monday, there have been more than 1,000 international students and recent graduates who have had their legal status changed by the US State Department. A review of the data shows a total of 188 colleges and universities in 44 states have had at least 1,066 international students who have lost their visas.

The actual number is much higher because there are 33 schools that report instances of visa revocation but have not yet reported the specific number of students impacted, and there are many smaller schools that are not reporting at all in order to avoid government scrutiny.

Meanwhile, in an accompanying article by *Inside Higher Ed*, most college administrators report that they are unsure why foreign students had their legal residency status terminated, or have not received any formal notification of government decisions. The report says, “A majority have yet to receive any communications from immigration authorities.”

In another article entitled “Smashing the Student Visa System,” Liam Knox of *Inside Higher Ed* wrote about the postings by university officials to a forum where the impact of Trump administration policies on the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System (SEVIS) database was being discussed:

When international students have their entry visas revoked, they almost always retain their legal residency status in SEVIS, according to immigration lawyers. They can stay in the country as long as they

remain enrolled in courses and must reapply for a new visa if they leave. Now, as the Trump administration revokes hundreds of student visas each week, federal immigration officials also seem to be terminating students’ SEVIS status—paving the way for arrest and deportation.

One forum member asked how it was possible that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) could alter SEVIS status on their own; they’d never seen it done before and thought it might be a mistake.

“I’m just wondering if we have any recourse to request corrections,” they wrote. “Trying to think creatively (and maybe desperately) at this point.”

University officials and immigration experts who spoke with *Inside Higher Ed* both on the record and on background echoed the concerns of the forum participants. They said the Trump administration is playing fast and loose with the visa system and that its tactics are severely limiting universities’ options to help students who may be targeted by ICE.

The officials on the forum said affected students were almost all Middle Eastern—Turkish, Kuwaiti, Saudi, Iranian—or from majority-Muslim countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Bangladesh. Some said they’d received letters with unusually forceful wording, demanding they turn over student records under threat of federal investigation. Many fretted over how to advise affected students without running afoul of immigration authorities themselves.

They all worried about how best to protect students while adjusting to a visa system that appeared to be changing overnight into something unrecognizable.

“Most of us are not practicing immigration attorneys (and haven’t needed to be),” one university official wrote. “We’re in a strange new world where little from past practice seems to apply.”



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