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Federal Trial Begins Over Trump-Era Crackdown on Pro-Palestinian Activists

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A closely watched federal trial opened Monday in Boston to decide whether the Trump administration overstepped constitutional limits in targeting students and scholars who supported Palestinian causes. The lawsuit, brought by several university associations, argues that the administration's actions violated both the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and the Administrative Procedure Act, which governs how federal agencies create regulations.

At the heart of the case is the claim that the government deliberately used immigration enforcement to silence pro-Palestinian voices on American campuses. Plaintiffs say noncitizen faculty and students across the United States were terrified into silence, stopped

joining protests, deleted social media posts, and pulled back from research and writing about Palestinian human rights.

“Students and faculty are avoiding political protests, purging their social media, and withdrawing from public engagement,” the plaintiffs wrote in court documents. They described how fear spread quickly after high-profile arrests.

One of those arrests involved Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian activist and Columbia University graduate who spent 104 days in immigration detention. Khalil has become a symbol of the administration’s hard-line approach. Another example is Tufts University student Rumeysa Ozturk, who was detained for six weeks after co-writing an opinion piece criticizing her school’s response to the war in Gaza. She was arrested while walking in a Boston suburb.

The Trump administration often described such activists as “pro-Hamas,” referencing the Palestinian militant group that attacked Israel in October 2023. However, many of the targeted students and faculty said they were simply expressing criticism of Israel’s policies, not endorsing violence.

Lawyers for the government deny that any coordinated policy existed. They argue that the plaintiffs cannot point to any formal document or directive proving a systematic effort to single out pro-Palestinian voices. According to the defense, the plaintiffs have created a narrative that has no basis in law or official records. They also say the First Amendment applies differently when it comes to immigration enforcement.

But the plaintiffs counter that evidence, including guidance on visa revocations and statements by officials, will show the crackdown was real and deliberate. As the trial unfolds, it could set a significant precedent for how far the government can go in using immigration powers to influence political speech.

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