



UNMASKING A PATTERN: MAHMOUD KHALIL AND THE AMPLIFICATION OF CAMPUS RADICALISM

A CYABRA REPORT WITH THE
ANTISEMITISM RESEARCH CENTER
(ARC) BY CAM
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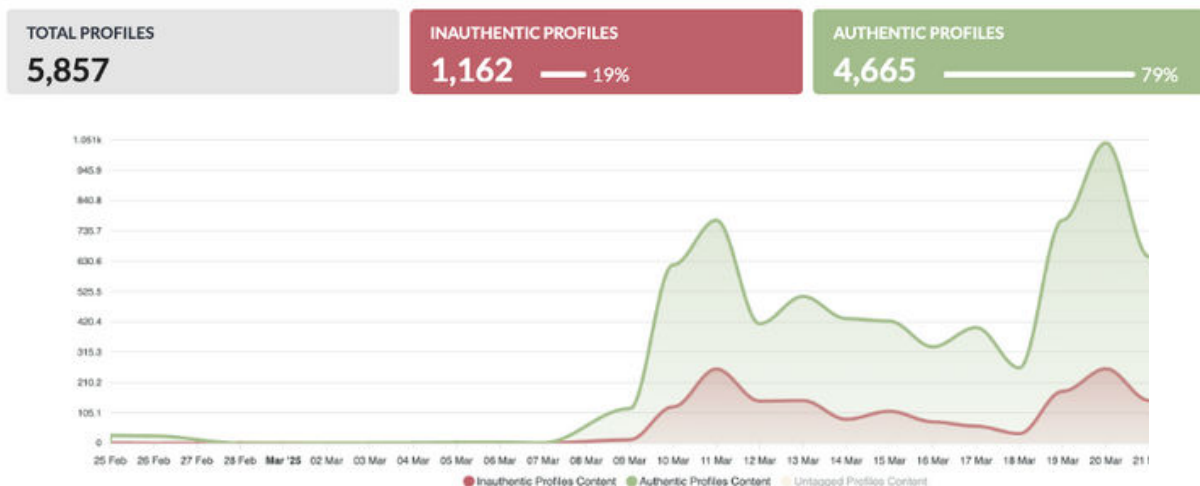
OVERVIEW

In March 2025, Mahmoud Khalil, a former graduate student at Columbia University and a central figure in the school's anti-Israel protest movement, was arrested by U.S. federal authorities. Khalil emerged as a prominent campus organizer since the Israel– Hamas war erupted in October 2023, leading dozens of demonstrations that often featured antisemitic rhetoric and conduct. Within hours, Khalil's detention sparked a surge of online outrage, with public opinion split between those hailing him as a free speech martyr and others condemning him as a radical, terror-supporting agitator. Yet Khalil is not an isolated case—he is one of many student activists across the U.S. whose actions have sown divisiveness and hatred, often amplified by coordinated online campaigns.

Khalil's activism at Columbia included orchestrating sit-ins that disrupted classes, distributing flyers branding Israel a "genocidal state," and leading chants of "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free"—a slogan widely interpreted as a call for Israel's violent destruction. These efforts fueled a climate of hostility, with Jewish students feeling increasingly alienated and unsafe, and incidents of antisemitic harassment and vandalism spiking after Khalil's rallies. His arrest only intensified this dynamic, as online narratives—both real and artificial—cast him as a symbol of resistance, further entrenching the contentious campus environment he helped create.

Fake Profile Involvement in the Conversation on X

Cyabra's analysis uncovered a significant wave of inauthentic engagement surrounding the Mahmoud Khalil story on X. From February 25 to March 25, 2025, Cyabra examined 5,857 profiles that produced 9,040 posts and comments about Khalil. Of these, **19%—roughly 1,112 profiles—were flagged as fake, nearly double the 7–10% typical in organic discussions.** These accounts mimicked real users' posting habits, active during peak evening hours (6 p.m. to 11 p.m. ET) and matching their frequency, a tactic designed to cloak their inauthenticity and infiltrate authentic discourse.

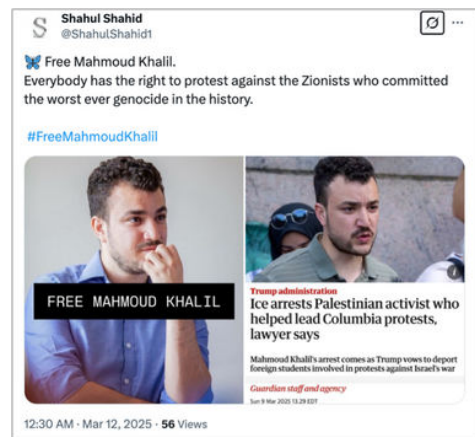
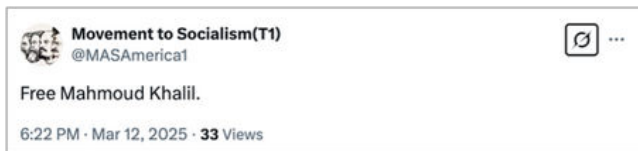


NARRATIVES AMPLIFIED BY FAKE ACCOUNTS

The research identified two key narratives pushed by these fake profiles.

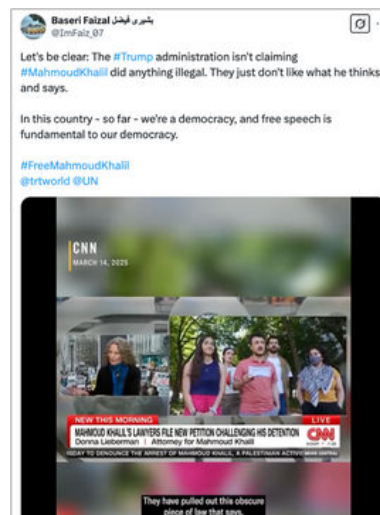
Calls to Free Mahmoud Khalil

- Of the 1,702 posts and comments from fake profiles, **987 demanded Khalil's release**, portraying him as a principled activist unjustly jailed for opposing Israeli policies. Laden with emotive rhetoric like "hero against genocide" and "martyr for Palestine," these posts used hashtags such as #FreeMahmoudKhalil and #FreePalestine to recast his arrest as an attack on civil liberties. This framing downplayed his role in campus unrest and the fomenting of antisemitism, amplifying his image as a victim rather than a provocateur.



Anti-Trump Messaging

- More than **250 posts attacked President Donald Trump and the U.S. government, labeling Khalil's arrest a dictatorial move by a "pro-Israel puppet regime."** Messages like "Trump silences students for speaking truth" and "Khalil's punishment is America's shame" sought to tie his case to anti-government fervor, depicting the Trump administration as an enemy of free speech and a suppressor of dissent.



SIGNS OF COORDINATION AMONG FAKE PROFILES

Cyabra detected clear hallmarks of a coordinated effort:

- Mutual Engagement: Fake profiles boosted each other's posts through likes, retweets, and comments, fabricating the appearance of organic support.
- Recent Account Creation: About 30% of these accounts (roughly 333) were created within the last year, a common trait in influence campaigns deploying new profiles to hijack trending topics.
- Synchronized Activity: Bursts of near-identical posts—e.g. "Free Mahmoud Now"—appeared within tight timeframes, hinting at automation or centralized orchestration.

Influence of the Coordinated Effort

Though inauthentic, these fake profiles wielded real influence. Their 1,702 posts amassed over 5,800 engagements—likes, comments, and shares—**potentially reaching 630,000 viewers**. While not a viral phenomenon, this reach demonstrates how coordinated fakery can subtly skew narratives, injecting polarizing content into public discourse under the guise of grassroots activism.

A Broader Pattern: Campus Radicalism and Antisemitism

Mahmoud Khalil is not an anomaly but part of a growing cohort of student leaders whose activism has reshaped campus life negatively for Jews and their allies. From UC-Berkeley to Yale, figures like Khalil have organized protests, encampments, and boycotts targeting Israel, regularly employing language and engaging in behavior that can be defined as nothing else but clear manifestations antisemitism. At Columbia, Khalil's actions—leading chants calling for Israel's elimination and accusing Jewish students of complicity in "apartheid"—mirrored incidents elsewhere: Nazi swastikas scrawled on dorm walls, Jewish centers vandalized, and students heckled for wearing kippahs.

This activism fosters an environment where Jewish students feel ostracized, their identities reduced to political punching bags. Faculty face pressure to align with the cause or risk censure, while administrators grapple with balancing free expression against the proliferation of hate. The online amplification of figures like Khalil—whether by real supporters or fake accounts—magnifies this toxicity, legitimizing rhetoric that equates Zionism with evil and Jews with oppressors.

Conclusion

The Mahmoud Khalil saga reveals a dual threat: **radical activism on the ground and its artificial amplification online**. As one of many such figures, Khalil exemplifies how student leaders can stoke division and antisemitism, leaving lasting scars on campus communities. The coordinated campaign on X, with its fake profiles and emotive narratives, underscores how digital manipulation can exploit these tensions, deepening polarization and distorting reality. As universities confront this rising tide, understanding the interplay between physical activism and online fakery is critical to addressing its root causes and repairing the frayed fabric of campus life.