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Ahmed Mohamed swept up, 'hoax bomb' charges swept away as Irving teen's story floods social media

By AVI SELK

9/17/2015



Ahmed Mohamed, 14, shows a photographer some of the electronics components in the bedroom that doubles as his workshop at his family's Irving home. At left is Ahmed's 3-year-old sister, Fatima Mohamed.

Irving's police chief announced Wednesday that charges won't be filed against Ahmed Mohamed, the MacArthur High School freshman arrested Monday after he brought what school officials and police described as a "hoax bomb" on campus.

At a joint press conference with Irving ISD, Chief Larry Boyd said the device — confiscated by an English teacher despite the teen's insistence that it was a clock — was "certainly suspicious in nature."

School officers questioned Ahmed about the device and why Ahmed had brought it to school. Boyd said Ahmed was then handcuffed "for his safety and for the safety of the officers" and taken to a juvenile detention center. He was later released to his parents, Boyd said.

"The follow-up investigation revealed the device apparently was a homemade experiment, and there's no evidence to support the perception he intended to create alarm," Boyd said, describing the incident as a "naive accident."

Asked if the teen's religious beliefs factored into his arrest, Boyd said the reaction "would have been the same" under any circumstances.

"We live in an age where you can't take things like that to school," he said. "Of course we've seen across our country horrific things happen, so we have to err on the side of caution."

The chief touted the "outstanding relationship" he's had with the Muslim community in Irving. He said he talked to members of the Muslim community this morning and plans to meet with Ahmed's father later today.

Speaking at an afternoon news conference outside the family's home, Ahmed's father said he's proud of his son and wowed by his skills.

"He fixed my phone, my car, my computer," Mohamed Elhassan Mohamed said. "He is a very smart, brilliant kid."

Mohamed said he's lived in America for 30 years, but this was a new experience for him.

"That is not America," Mohamed Elhassan Mohamed said of his son's humiliation after being handcuffed in front of his classmates.

But Mohamed said he's also been touched by the outpouring of support for his son.

"What is happening is touching the heart of everyone with children," he said. "And that is America."

Ahmed, himself, also spoke, saying he was saddened by the initial reaction his invention provoked but amazed at what has followed.

"It made me really happy to see all these people support me," he said.

The teen said he hasn't spoken to anyone from MacArthur High, where he was suspended until Thursday.

"I'm thinking about transferring from MacArthur to any other school," Ahmed said.

Irving ISD spokeswoman Lesley Weaver also addressed the media, saying that information "made public to this point has been very unbalanced."

She declined to provide details on how school officials handled the incident, citing laws intended to safeguard student privacy.

“We were doing everything with an abundance of caution to protect all of our students in Irving,” she said.

Irving Mayor Beth Van Duyne took to Facebook to defend the actions of the school district and police, saying their daily work helped make Irving “one of the safest cities in the country.”

“I do not fault the school or the police for looking into what they saw as a potential threat,” Van Duyne wrote. “We have all seen terrible and violent acts committed in schools. ... Perhaps some of those could have been prevented and lives could have been spared if people were more vigilant.”

The mayor later amended her post, acknowledging that she would be “very upset” had the same thing happened to her own child.

“It is my sincere desire that Irving ISD students are encouraged to use their creativity, develop innovations and explore their interests in a manner that fosters higher learning,” Van Duyne wrote. “Hopefully, we can all learn from this week’s events and the student, who has obvious gifts, will not feel at all discouraged from pursuing his talent in electronics and engineering.”

Shortly after the press conference, President Barack Obama extended a Twitter invitation for Ahmed to bring his “cool clock” to the White House. “We should inspire more kids like you to like science. It’s what makes America great,” the tweet read.

Josh Earnest, Obama's press secretary, said the case goes to show how stereotypes can cloud the judgment of even the most “good-hearted people.”

“It’s clear that at least some of Ahmed's teachers failed him,” Earnest said. “That’s too bad, but it’s not too late for all of us to use this as a teachable moment and to search our own conscience for biases in whatever form they take.”

The White House also extended the teen an invitation to speak with NASA scientists and astronauts at next month’s Astronomy Night.

Ahmed, still wearing the NASA shirt he was arrested in, said Wednesday that he gladly accepted the White House invitation.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg also joined the social media chorus, extending an open invitation to visit and exhorting Ahmed to “keep building.”

“Having the skill and ambition to build something cool should lead to applause, not arrest,” Zuckerberg wrote. “The future belongs to people like Ahmed.”

Earlier Wednesday at a modest, red-brick house in central Irving, Ahmed and his family welcomed media crews at the front door and in the backyard as they tried to come to grips with the boy’s overnight ascension to international celebrity.

His sisters, 18-year-old Eyman and 17-year-old Ayisha, could hardly keep up with the tweets and stunning news about their little brother. Because Ahmed was never much for social media, the girls set up a Twitter account for him, @IStandWithAhmed, and watched it balloon to thousands of followers within hours.

“We’re trending No. 1!” Ayisha cried to her sister, holding a cellphone over a stuffed coffee table in the living room.

“It's a blessing and a curse,” Ayisha said of Ahmed’s arrest and subsequent fame. “I don’t think he’ll ever be able to live normally again.”

But they were happy for invitations to visit companies including Google and to move and study in other cities, and for the tweets of support, including one from Hillary Clinton. They recalled how, barely two days earlier, their brother described struggling to hold back tears in front of police officers after his arrest.

Ahmed, after finishing up another interview in the backyard, recalled his emotions as he was handcuffed at Irving MacArthur High School and removed from campus.



The homemade digital clock that led to Ahmed Mohamed's arrest.

“I was really mad,” Ahmed said as he looked at a much-retweeted photo of himself in handcuffs. “I was like, ‘Why am I here?’”

A Council on American Islamic Relations representative then hustled Ahmed and his family off to talk to a lawyer.

After they left, Ahmed’s grandmother, Aisha Musa, lay on a bed in the dining room, resting her feet. She had immigrated from Sudan with the rest of the family years ago.

She doesn’t speak English or know her exact age, but her granddaughters translated her take on her grandson’s celebrity: “I want my son’s son to grow old and have a good job. I thank God there’s nothing people can say but [that] we are good people.”

Update at 10:09 a.m. Wednesday: Former secretary of state and Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton joined the tidal wave of tweets supporting Mohamed Ahmed after his arrest Monday for bringing a homemade digital clock to school.

"Assumptions and fear don't keep us safe -- they hold us back. Ahmed, stay curious and keep building," Clinton's tweet read.

Irving ISD officials and Irving police will hold a press conference at 11 a.m. Wednesday at the Irving Criminal Justice Center. We will continue to update this story as new developments emerge.

Update at 9:32 a.m. Wednesday: After the story of Ahmed Mohamed's arrest for bringing a homemade digital clock to school went viral Tuesday, triggering an outpouring of support for him on social media, Ahmed tweeted a thank-you early Wednesday.

Original story by Avi Selk:

IRVING — Ahmed Mohamed — who makes his own radios and repairs his own go-kart — hoped to impress his teachers when he brought a homemade clock to MacArthur High on Monday.

Instead, the school phoned police about Ahmed's circuit-stuffed pencil case.

So the 14-year-old missed the student council meeting and took a trip in handcuffs to juvenile detention. His clock now sits in an evidence room. Police say they may yet charge him with making a hoax bomb — though they acknowledge he told everyone who would listen that it's a clock.

In the meantime, Ahmed's been suspended, his father is upset and the Council on American-Islamic Relations is once again eyeing claims of Islamophobia in Irving.

Box of circuit boards

A box full of circuit boards sits at the foot of Ahmed's small bed in central Irving. His door marks the border where the Mohamed family's cramped but lavishly decorated house begins to look like the back room at RadioShack.

"Here in high school, none of the teachers know what I can do," Ahmed said, fiddling with a cable while a soldering iron dangled from the shelf behind him.

He loved robotics club in middle school and was searching for a similar niche in his first few weeks of high school.

So he decided to do what he's always done: He built something.

Ahmed's clock was hardly his most elaborate creation. He said he threw it together in about 20 minutes before bedtime on Sunday: a circuit board and power supply wired to a digital display, all strapped inside a case with a tiger hologram on the front.

He showed it to his engineering teacher first thing Monday morning and didn't get quite the reaction he'd hoped for.

"He was like, 'That's really nice,'" Ahmed said. "'I would advise you not to show any other teachers.'"

He kept the clock inside his school bag in English class, but the teacher complained when the alarm beeped in the middle of a lesson. Ahmed brought his invention up to show her afterward.

"She was like, it looks like a bomb," he said.

“I told her, ‘It doesn’t look like a bomb to me.’”

The teacher kept the clock. When the principal and a police officer pulled Ahmed out of sixth period, he suspected he wouldn’t get it back.

They led Ahmed into a room where four other police officers waited. He said an officer he’d never seen before leaned back in his chair and remarked: “Yup. That’s who I thought it was.”

Ahmed felt suddenly conscious of his brown skin and his name — one of the most common in the Muslim religion. But the police kept him busy with questions.

The bell rang at least twice, he said, while the officers searched his belongings and questioned his intentions. The principal threatened to expel him if he didn’t make a written statement, he said.

“They were like, ‘So you tried to make a bomb?’” Ahmed said.

“I told them no, I was trying to make a clock.”

“He said, ‘It looks like a movie bomb to me.’”

Police skepticism

Ahmed never claimed his device was anything but a clock, said police spokesman James McLellan. And police have no reason to think it was dangerous. But officers still didn’t believe Ahmed was giving them the whole story.

“We have no information that he claimed it was a bomb,” McLellan said. “He kept maintaining it was a clock, but there was no broader explanation.”

Asked what broader explanation the boy could have given, the spokesman explained:

“It could reasonably be mistaken as a device if left in a bathroom or under a car. The concern was, what was this thing built for? Do we take him into custody?”

Police led Ahmed out of MacArthur about 3 p.m., his hands cuffed behind him and an officer on each arm. A few students gaped in the halls. He remembers the shocked expression of his student counselor — the one “who knows I’m a good boy.”

Ahmed was spared the inside of a cell. The police sent him out of the juvenile detention center to meet his parents shortly after taking his fingerprints.

They’re still investigating the case, and Ahmed hasn’t been back to school. His family said the principal suspended him for three days.

“They thought, ‘How could someone like this build something like this unless it’s a threat?’” Ahmed said.

An Irving ISD statement gave no details about the case, citing student privacy laws. But a letter addressed to "Parents/Guardians" and signed by MacArthur Principal Dan Cummings said Irving police had "responded to a suspicious-looking item on campus" and had determined that "the item ... did not pose a threat to your child's safety."

‘Invent good things’

“He just wants to invent good things for mankind,” said Ahmed’s father, Mohamed Elhassan Mohamed, who immigrated from Sudan and occasionally returns there to run for president. “But because his name is Mohamed and because of Sept. 11, I think my son got mistreated.”