

Britain: Oppose deportation of Hicham Yezza

By International Students for Social Equality
30 May 2008

The International Students for Social Equality condemns and opposes the arrest and detention of a student and a member of the faculty at the University of Nottingham in England. Student Rizwaan Sabir and staff member Hicham Yezza were both arrested on May 14 under the Terrorism Act 2000. Subsequent to this action, the Home Office has issued an order to deport Hicham Yezza to Algeria—scheduled to take place on June 1.

Sabir is a politics student at the university planning to complete an MA on Islamic extremism and international terrorist networks. He was researching his dissertation on “the American approach to Al Qaeda in Iraq.” As part of his preparation, he downloaded, from a US government web site, a copy of an Al Qaeda training manual. The document is freely available on a number of web sites and can be purchased in book form at Amazon.com.

As the document was some 1,500 pages long, Sabir realised that he could not afford to print it himself. He then e-mailed the document to Yezza to ask if he was able to print it for him. Sometime after this, someone contacted the police stating that the manual had been seen on Yezza’s computer.

The police arrived at the university and arrested both Rizwaan and Yezza and searched their homes. Their mobile phones and computers were seized and their family and friends interrogated.

Campus property was also searched, with uniformed police maintaining a presence at the main Trent building. Some students arriving on campus the following day were also searched. Musab Younis, an organiser of the campaign to defend Yezza, said that during the investigation, “The police regularly attempted to collate information about student activism and peaceful campaigning. They asked numerous questions about the student peace magazine *Ceasefire* and other political student activities.”

Sabir and Yezza were both detained for six days before being released on May 20 without charge.

Following his release, Sabir said, “I was absolutely broken. I didn’t sleep. I’d close my eyes then hear the keys clanking and I would be up again. As I realised the severity I thought I’d end up in Belmarsh [high security prison] with the nutcases. It was psychological torture. On Tuesday they

read me a statement confirming it was an illegal document which shouldn’t be used for research purposes. To this day no one has ever clarified that point. They released me. I was shaking violently, I fell against the wall, then on the floor and I just cried.”

The lawyer for Sabir, Tayab Ali, said, “The two members of the university were treated as though they were part of an Al Qaeda cell. They were detained for 48 hours, and a warrant for further detention was granted on the basis that the police had mobile phones and evidence taken from computers to justify this.”

He added, “This could have been dealt with sensibly if the university had discussed the issue with Rizwaan and his tutors. This is the worrying aspect of the extension of detention [under the Terrorism Act]. They can use hugely powerful arrest powers before investigating.”

Attack on democratic rights and academic freedom

The arrests of both Sabir and Yezza and the decision to deport Yezza are fundamental attacks on democratic rights. Yezza has been arbitrarily denied due process and the right to a public hearing to defend himself.

Upon his release, Yezza was immediately rearrested under immigration legislation. After reviewing his case, immigration authorities set a date for him to appear at Nottingham Magistrates Court on July 16 to decide his status. He was to appear on the charge that he did not have the right documentation to remain in the UK. Instead, on May 23, his solicitor was told that Yezza would be summarily deported. He is being detained at the Colnbrook Immigration Removal Centre, near Heathrow Airport.

The deportation order is being appealed. His solicitor David Smith said, “He vehemently denies this charge. He wants the case to go to crown court for trial so that he can establish his complete innocence.”

Yezza has told his supporters, “The Home Office operates with a Gestapo mentality. They have no respect for human dignity and human life. They treat foreign nationals as disposable goods—the recklessness and the cavalier approach they have belongs to a totalitarian state. I thank everyone for their support—it’s been extremely heartening and humbling.”

Yezza, who came to Britain from Algeria, had applied for

leave to remain in the UK where he has lived for the past 13 years. Up until his arrest by the police, the authorities had never sought to challenge his right to live and work in the UK. He was employed as the PA to the Head of the School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Professor Lesley Milne. Before this, he won a scholarship and studied for a degree, a master's and a PhD. Yezza is a popular figure, with a broad network of friends at the university and in his local community.

During his time as a student, he served as a member of the Student's Union Executive Committee, and on the University Senate. He was the president of the Arabic Society, and the editor of the *Voice* magazine, a journal for international students. He was also the editor of *Ceasefire*, the political journal of the Nottingham Student Peace Movement.

A campaign to oppose the deportation of Hicham Yezza has won widespread support. Hundreds of students and faculty members the University of Nottingham demonstrated on May 28 in the pouring rain. A silent protest was held in opposition to the attacks on academic freedom that are at the centre of this case.

Labour MP Alan Simpson has written a letter to government minister Liam Byrne stating, "I can see no reason for an emergency deportation of Mr. Hicham Yezza other than to cover the embarrassment of Police and Intelligence services... To race him out of the country will only provoke widespread protests against an arbitrary deportation with no right to a proper hearing. Mr. Hicham Yezza was scheduled for a hearing on 16th July 2008. I can see no reason why you should race this forward and would urge you to revert to the original timescale with which a proper hearing and proper representations can be made."

A web site features model resolutions and a petition that can be sent to Jackie Smith, the Home Secretary. <http://freehichamyezza.wordpress.com/>

The University of Nottingham has made no statement in opposition to the police arrests and subsequent decision to deport Yezza. A spokesman initially defended the actions of the university in calling the police and stated that the material in question was not "legitimate." The spokesman said that it was duty bound to inform police of "material of this nature." Only later, after the case had received wider attention, did the university state that it was valid research material.

Even then, a statement from the university sought to blame Sabir for sending the document to Yezza, asserting that "If you're an academic or a registered student, then you have very good cause to access whatever material your scholarship requires. But there is an expectation that you will act sensibly within current UK law and wouldn't send it

on to any Tom, Dick or Harry."

Neither Sabir nor Yezza, who is a member of the university's own staff, did anything unlawful.

A number of academics at the university, including Dr. Alf Gunvald Nilsen, Dr. Bettina Renz and Dr. Vanessa Pupavac of the School of Politics and International Relations, have condemned the arrests and the statements made to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* by the registrar at the University, Dr. Paul Greatrix.

Greatrix stated on May 22 that the arrests were made in response to a "low-key" and "sensitively handled investigation" by the Nottinghamshire Constabulary and the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit. He added, "Members of the university can be reassured that we take very seriously our duty to ensure that students and staff are free to study and work in a safe, secure and tolerant environment. There are many ways in which we all work to deliver such conditions and to ensure that everyone is able to enjoy freedom of speech and expression within the law. The university is an open and free arena for debate and dissent."

In their letter of protest, the academics wrote, "The University did in fact state that it deemed the document illegitimate, and only at a later stage retracted this and replaced with the modified statement that it was appropriate for academic members of staff to be in possession of such materials.... We find it surprising that a university would express such disregard of the rights of engaged citizens to educate themselves on issues of public concern."

Contrary to Greatrix's claim that the university is committed to preserving freedom of speech, the academics wrote, "In fact, the university has been deeply reluctant to enter into any kind of dialogue with students and staff that are concerned about the status of academic freedom and civil liberties.

"It is clear to us, therefore, that the University of Nottingham will not be an 'open and free arena for debate and dissent' until an apology is offered to Rizwaan Sabir and Hicham Yezza, and until the university guarantees the academic freedom, civil liberties and human rights of its staff and students"

The ISSE fully supports these statements. We call on all students and working people nationally and internationally to demand the immediate release of Hicham Yezza.



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