

Britain: Details of hundreds of students handed to CIA

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The details of up to one thousand Muslim students at University College London (UCL) have been made available to the CIA jointly by the university and the Students Union. The move represents a grave attack on democratic rights and another step towards tighter controls over academic institutions in the UK.

An article appeared in the *Independent* on April 1 confirming that the Metropolitan Police had, on behalf of the CIA, approached UCL's Islamic Society for details of its members between 2005 and 2008. The request was in connection with the investigations into the failed Detroit bomb plot on Christmas day last year. After being told by police that the data of the entire membership would be kept on file for at least seven years, the Islamic Society president Mojeed Adams-Mogaji refused to disclose the information.

The police then approached the Students Union, which provided names and email addresses of all members of the Islamic Society at the university between September 2005 and summer 2009. Subsequently after discussions, the university's registry divulged the home addresses and telephone numbers of these individuals to the police, which were then passed to the CIA.

The main suspect of the failed Detroit bomb plot, Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, studied at UCL between 2005 and 2008. He was president of the Islamic society between 2006 and 2007. There was no proven connection between Abdulmutallab and any of the students whose details were obtained by the CIA, with many confirming that they had never seen, let alone met him.

That has not stopped the stepping up of intimidation against the students, with at least 50 addresses on the list having been visited by police. Not a single student

has been charged or arrested as a result of the disclosure. Sayyida Mehrali, a first year student at UCL commented, "I feel that it is a bit extreme that my information has been passed onto the Metropolitan Police as I joined UCL after Umar Farouk had left. There was never any opportunity to meet this individual and I think it's shocking that they have my details on a database."

With the students' details now on a CIA database, concerns have been raised that some may find themselves on the US's anti-terrorism watch-list, which would bar them from entering the country and open up the possibility of increased surveillance. Given the record of the US when it comes to detention without trial, extraordinary rendition and the torturing of prisoners, the threats to those involved are very real.

Spokesmen for the university and the students union responded to the news by seeking to absolve themselves of all blame, stating that they had merely complied with police requests. Adams-Mogaji was severely critical of the role of the union, commenting, "We also realised that the student union gave the details of the UCL Medical Islamic Society without being requested for it. The union is supposed to protect the societies under it and not hastily succumb to pressure without the need to. We're clearly not safe with the union and our trust in them is undoubtedly diminishing."

Only after the Students Union came under sustained pressure did it notify the students whose personal details had been revealed to the intelligence services.

Gareth Peirce, the prominent human rights lawyer who provided advice to the Islamic Society, drew attention to the legal implications of the disclosure. "You wonder if he [Abdulmutallab] had been a member of a society without the name Islamic on it, then would

there have been such an appetite to grab the information. It adds to the fear that the Muslim community is a suspect community. The whole concept of data protection was meant to nail down absolute privacy and here it is being breached without a legal reason being imposed on the university to comply.”

Not only has there been no “legal reason” given to justify the disclosure of information on the private lives of hundreds of students to the intelligence services. There has not been a shred of evidence produced to link these individuals to any crime. A precedent has been set which permits the intelligence services to gather information held by institutions and organisations on whoever is deemed to be a “threat”, without the slightest attempt to prove any criminal activity.

This episode is only the latest in a mounting attack on basic democratic rights by the Labour government. Sweeping powers have been granted to the state in recent years, including the power to detain suspects without charge for up to 28 days, the ability to charge individuals on the “suspicion” of links to terrorism, and a vast broadening of police powers to stop and search. The conduct of the police and special branch has become ever more aggressive, with the shooting of Jean Charles De Menezes in 2005 and the death last year of Ian Tomlinson at the hands of the police being only the most prominent examples.

Last month, even the government’s own commission reported that anti-terrorist policies were “alienating Muslim communities.”

Universities have come under increasing surveillance, with Special Branch activity stepped up at campuses across the country. Dundee University was one of the first to be targeted between 2005 and 2007. The *Independent* noted that Muslims involved in the Islamic Society there had been visited by police at their homes, and Special Branch officers had posed as members of the public to attend society meetings on campus. The activities of the Special Branch officers brought protests by student groups.

The failed plot in December provoked a new round of calls for universities to clamp down on Islamic groups, with the media accusing “academic liberalism” of being responsible for the development of extremist views on campuses which were leading to terrorist attacks. In March, the government confirmed it would assign counter terrorism officers to institutions where

students were deemed to be in danger of coming under the influence of “extremist” views. This provides the basis for measures to be employed against any political opposition that emerges amongst students and workers.

Voices have also been raised in favour of tightening the immigration system, in order to make it more difficult for international students to come to Britain. In the current General Election campaign, this theme has been wholeheartedly embraced by the major parties.



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