

University of Nottingham suspends professor in major assault on free speech

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The University of Nottingham, England, has suspended Rod Thornton, a lecturer in International Security and Terrorism and an expert in his field. The suspension came after Thornton published a paper on the May 2008 arrest of two men, Rizwaan Sabir and Hicham Yezza, on the campus.

Both were held for six days under the Terrorism Act 2000, before being released without charge. Sabir was a student at the university at the time, while Yezza was a university member of staff in its School of Modern Languages.

The arrests took place after three documents were found on Yezza's office computer. Sabir had sent the three documents, which included the *Al Qaeda Training Manual*, to Yezza. The latter was helping him with research and assisting him in drafting a research proposal, as part of Sabir's dissertation involving a study of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Thornton was responsible for Sabir in his role as Postgraduate Tutor in the School of Politics at the university. His paper on the arrests, "Radicalisation at universities or radicalisation by universities? How a student's use of a library book became a 'major Islamist plot'", deserves a wide audience.

The detention of the two men and the subsequent attempt to deport Yezza represented a fundamental attack on their democratic rights. Both were arbitrarily denied due process and the right to a public hearing to defend themselves. While detained, their homes were searched, property seized, and their friends and family questioned at length. In this, senior management at the University of Nottingham played a central role, claiming that the two had possessed, "terrorist materials".

The decision of the University of Nottingham to suspend Thornton is at one with its activities since it first called in the police, which led to the arrests of Sabir and Yezza.

Students and staff have protested at the university to demand Thornton's reinstatement. Although no longer at the university, Sabir and Yezza spoke at the protest. Also supporting Thornton's reinstatement are some 67 professors and doctors from universities around the world, who have written a letter published in the *Guardian* on May 11.

The academics, who include Professor Noam Chomsky from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, state that they are "deeply concerned" by the suspension and "call on the University of Nottingham to openly and thoroughly examine

the claims made in his research. We also request that an independent inquiry be conducted into the university's actions on this matter".

The "crime" of Sabir and Yezza, as Thornton points out in his meticulous document, "was to have in their possession three documents—all of which were, in fact, available from their own university's library".

Two were articles published in *Foreign Affairs* and the *Middle East Policy Council Journal* respectively.

It was the *Al Qaeda Training Manual*, however, that led to spurious claims that Sabir and Yezza were involved in a "terrorist" plot. The manual is available in different versions and can be freely downloaded from the US Department of Justice website or bought on Amazon. The work is also on the reading lists at the University of Oxford.

The most complete edition of the manual, as Thornton makes clear, is the one available in the library of the University of Nottingham, and accessible to all students and staff.

Despite this, the registrar at the university, Dr. Paul Greatrix, was quoted in a police statement at the time as saying that the *Al Qaeda Training Manual* had "no valid reason to exist whatsoever".

Thornton prepared his 112-page paper for an April conference of the British International Studies Association (BISA). The paper was submitted for the Critical Studies on Terrorism on Teaching About Terrorism panel at the conference. Thornton's document was then posted on the BISA web site.

The University of Nottingham claimed that the document was defamatory and, according to the *Guardian*, "a member of staff at the university" then "lobbied successfully for Thornton's article to be taken down from an academic website, arguing that it contained defamatory allegations".

Thornton anticipated such action by university management, stating in his introduction, "In writing this article I may be accused of 'bringing my university into disrepute'. My contract of employment warns me against this. I am, though, not bringing my university into disrepute; merely those who run it. There is a difference".

Thornton's paper reproduces documents, including emails, letters and notes he has uncovered over the past three years

under the Freedom of Information Act. Commenting on his “naming of names”, the author states, “those who work for a UK university work for a publicly funded institution and, as such, they must accept the consequences of so doing”, adding, “And, since nothing I say here is untrue—it can all be checked against documentary evidence—I am not defaming anyone”.

He adds, “I feel I have a duty to ‘whistleblow’ against the University of Nottingham. Senior personnel within this university engaged in activity that can be classed as unfair, discriminatory and, sometimes, outright illegal”.

Thornton’s document [free registration to Scribd required] is available to download here.

For his efforts to reveal the truth about the role of senior university management in the arrest and subsequent tarring of Sabir and Yezza as “terrorists”, Thornton had faced, at the time of his document’s publication, seven disciplinary hearings.

Thornton notes that “the police had made their arrests based on erroneous evidence provided by two men: the Registrar of the University of Nottingham and an academic within the institution”.

This academic was not in the School of Politics, in which Sabir was a student, but was Bernard McGuirk, professor of Romance Languages and Literary Theory. McGuirk said it was his opinion that the *Al Qaeda Training Manual* was “illegal”. Thornton states, “Subsequently, despite being made aware of the mistakes it had made, the university not only refused to apologise to the two arrested men but it also began to resort to defensive measures that attempted to discredit the names of both of the two accused and of innocent university employees. Untruth piled on untruth until a point was reached where the Home Office itself farcically came to advertise the case as ‘a major Islamist plot’”.

Thornton explains that the real name of the *Al Qaeda Training Manual* actually is *Military Studies in the Jihad against the Tyrants*. The author explains, “It was discovered (written in Arabic) by British police in Manchester in 2000. It was only given its current name by the US DoJ [Department of Justice] as a ‘public relations gambit’ so that its possession would more likely lead to convictions on terrorism charges in the US”.

He adds, “Suspects are much more likely—are they not?—to be convicted by juries if they are caught in possession of the ‘Al Qaeda Training Manual’, rather than something confusingly called ‘Military Studies in the Jihad against the Tyrants’. The ‘tyrants’ actually being the Egyptian secular leaders from the 1950s onwards—Gamel Abdul Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak”.

Much of the material seems to date from the 1950s, and many of the operations cited took place in the 1940s, Thornton states.

Breaching its duty of care to Sabir and Yezza during their six days of incarceration, the university did not contact the two men or offer them any support. Rather, as Thornton documents, the day after Sabir’s arrest, the university had already prepared

an exclusion letter, complete with the vice-chancellor’s signature block.

“It appeared that as far as the university was concerned, Sabir was guilty until proven innocent”, comments Thornton.

Thornton’s document makes an important point regarding the unprecedented nature of the arrests of Sabir and Yezza. He states, “Previous arrests of young Muslims in the UK on terrorism charges involving the possession of terrorist literature have always involved a raft of material that could be defined as ‘terrorist’ or ‘radical’ in nature. What is unique about the arrests of Sabir and Yezza is that there was only *one* document that could be described in any way, and only at first glance, as ‘suspicious’—the *Al Qaeda Training Manual*. Their arrest in this respect is completely without precedent in this country”.

What then accounts for such a drastic clampdown as that which occurred in Nottingham? The arrests followed a long period during which the Labour government, under the pretext of the “war on terror” and backed by right-wing academics, demanded the curtailing of basic democratic freedoms.

Central to this was the campaign to root out “extremism” on campuses. In September 2005 Professor Anthony Glee, the director of the Brunel Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies (BCISS) at Brunel University, co-authored a report published by the Social Affairs Unit, “When Students Turn to Terror: Terrorist and Extremist Activity on British Campuses”.

In 2007, the government issued a document on how universities should work with the police to “root out terrorism” on campuses. The document stated, “If a university or college suspects that an offence has been or is likely to be committed then a report should be made to the police. Educational providers should have a policy on the release of student information which should be followed”.

As a result universities are now intimately involved in routinely spying on and monitoring of the political activities of students.

Thornton is to be commended for his work in exposing the involvement of management at the University of Nottingham in the arrests of two innocent young men.

The Socialist Equality Party and its student movement, the International Students for Social Equality, join all those in demanding his reinstatement and a public inquiry into the university’s actions.



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