

# University student walk-out at London's SOAS against crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests

Our reporters  
26 October 2023

Students at University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) walked out of class on Wednesday, protesting the suspension of four students and wider threats against the right to protest on campus against Israel's war on Gaza.

Four students were suspended by the university on October 12, after they rallied on the steps of SOAS against Israel's genocidal military bombardment of Gaza. On October 13, students from the Palestine Society on campus who were not even present at the rally were threatened with disciplinary action if they continue protesting.

The action against students' right to protest is part of a wider clampdown at SOAS. Over the past fortnight, large numbers of security personnel have been deployed at entry points to the campus and inside buildings. Police have harassed and questioned students simply for wearing a keffiyeh.

Hundreds of students joined Wednesday's walk-out that took place at midday. They rallied in SOAS's forecourt, chanting, "From London to Gazamobilise the Intifada!", "Resistance is justified!" and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!"

Student leaders who addressed the protest demanded that all four suspensions be dropped, allowing the students to resume their studies. They called for the withdrawal of disciplinary threats against members of the Palestinian Society and echoed its call that SOAS must "re-establish the right to protest on the steps of the main building, the historic centre of activism on campus".

The university has attempted to mask its crack-down on democratic rights by claiming that students protesting on the steps pose a health and safety risk. But the prohibition extends way beyond the steps. At Wednesday's rally, security insisted that members of the Socialist Equality

Party dismantle their literature tent in the forecourt area. Unidentified security personnel photographed SEP posters and pamphlets, along with leaflets advertising a November 9 public meeting, "Stop Israel's genocidal war on Gaza!" SEP members were also put on notice that they were being filmed via body cameras.

An SEP member later addressed students during the open mic session, warning that Israel's genocidal rampage in Gaza was being backed by the major imperialist powers and was part of a developing Third World War. In Europe, NATO was waging a proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, while a massive military build-up was underway against China. He called for students to turn to the working class as the only social force with the power to defeat imperialism.

Citing the urgent call issued by Palestinian trade unions for global solidarity to paralyse Israel's war machine, he condemned the refusal of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union, Unite and the Communication Workers Union to organise action.

After the rally, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with students about their reasons for attending the walk-out and their wider views on the war against Gaza.

Euan, a second-year politics and international relations student at SOAS said, "It's tragic and horrifying what's going on in Gaza. It's been going on for so long now — 75 years of Israeli occupation of Palestine.

"It's important to take a stand. The international community generally stands behind Israel. UN resolutions that are passed saying that Palestine needs to be recognised, but they are always vetoed by the United States.

"Britain is complicit. With the British government saying that Israel has the right to defend itself, its

essentially just saying that it's okay for Israel to go on bombing Palestinians indiscriminately. Saying this isn't support for attacking innocent Israelis. That's obviously abhorrent, but the truth is that Israel is the aggressor. They are a powerful state which is given billions and billions by the United States every single year. They bomb, bomb, bomb the Palestinians indiscriminately. They say they are terrorists, but we all know that innocent people are dying. We need to do something to rein Israel in.

“The fact that students have been suspended for simply supporting the protests should concern all students. Universities are meant to be a place for self-expression. Some were apparently suspended who weren't even at the protest but are members of the Palestine society.”

Nilam said, “The University is taking drastic measures against anyone who is openly supporting Palestine. Security has been doubled on campus. The police have been called on students just for wearing keffiyehs—even off campus. A group of students wearing Palestinian colours had the police called on them by the University, and they were interrogated. On campus, it has become impossible to protest and multiple students have been threatened with suspension and four students have already been suspended.

“You would have thought that everyone would have learnt from history. Everyone says that history repeats itself. When we look back and say, “I can't believe that people would have supported the Nazi regime”, or Apartheid in South Africa, or slavery across the western world—we think it was awful that people supported it. But we are doing the same thing, we are supporting a terrorist state.

“The governments have clearly supported Israel—Italy, France, the United States—but within those countries a lot of people are protesting.

One has taken the side of their political allies and the people have taken the side of the victims. To pretend that supporting the Palestinians is anti-Semitic is bogus. If you study history, you should know not to be on the side of the oppressors, whether it's the Jews being oppressed or the Palestinians. It's really nice to see the number of Jews all over the world who have stood up for Palestine. So that comparison is such an insult to the Jewish people.

“Israel's blockade is a war crime. And for the Labour Party to come out and actively support war crimes is insanity. They are losing popularity so much now, and they deserve it. [Former Labour leader] Jeremy Corbyn's refusal to publicly condemn Starmer makes you lose confidence in everything that he's been saying. People

have seen Corbyn as an icon for workers' rights and morality. But for him to not be able to speak openly is sad to see. It makes you feel that there's nothing else he says that you can trust. It is really depressing to know that there is not a single person in power who you can look to for any sort of moral clarity.”

Nilam agreed there was a direct connection between the war on Gaza and the war on the working class at home: “You wouldn't believe this is one of the top 10 richest countries in the world. The way they treat us, they hate us. They want to wipe us off the face of the planet. We can't have the National Health Service, we can't have education, we can't have a wage that matches the cost of living, we can't have a house, we can't rent. I don't even know where they want us to go right now. What do they want us to do? Die? Shriveled away? Disappear?”

Jacob said, “It's an unprecedented level of violence, but if you look at the statistics, around 95 percent of the people killed in the Palestine/Israel conflict have been Palestinians.

“We are in a bubble as central London university students, but it does seem that the tide of popular opinion is changing in the UK. In a recent series of polls something like only 3 percent said we should provide arms to Israel. So the government is representing only 3 percent of the population!”

Asked about the four SOAS Students suspended for voicing opposition to Israel's genocidal campaign, Jacob said, “I think it's disgusting. It betrays the values for which SOAS has been known for years. You can see that over time the underlying values and morality of the university have changed. And to suspend students who haven't done anything wrong apart from holding a protest is a shame on SOAS.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**