

Massive state clampdown on UK campus protests against Gaza genocide

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The repression of students protesting Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza is being mounted as a co-ordinated operation between university management, the police, including counter-terrorism units, and the highest levels of the state.

A joint Liberty Investigates/Sky News report, "Uncovered: the 'worsening crackdown' on pro-Palestine activism at UK universities", was accompanied by independent assessments of the findings.

The report states, "Alongside interviews with students and staff at universities across the UK, reporters from Liberty Investigates also submitted a series of [Freedom of Information] FOI requests to more than 150 institutions, asking for emails discussing Gaza protest activity with police or other security departments between October 2023 and August 2024".

The FOI requests asked if the university had communicated with police/private intelligence, launched disciplinary investigations against students/faculty, or both.

Liberty Investigates reports "at least 28 universities are now known to have launched disciplinary investigations against students and staff in connection with their Palestine activism since October 2023, with as many as 113 people affected."

Sky News states that "we found that at least 40 universities discussed Gaza protest activity with police forces or private intelligence organisations. Thirty-six universities had direct communication with the police."

Liberty Investigates notes "13 universities met at least once with police to discuss Gaza protests, including the University of London, Cambridge, and Manchester."

Repression on campus, aimed at criminalising protests against the genocide, is even wider. While there were 107 complete responses, "Nearly 50 universities refused to respond to at least one of the FOI requests put to them, often citing health and safety or security concerns, or saying to do so could compromise law enforcement efforts."

Sky News explains, "We've seen instances of universities reporting protesters to police, starting dozens of

disciplinary, and in some instances we found universities collaborating with private surveillance firms."

Liberty described how at Newcastle University on May 29 last year, police broke up a peaceful rally, "with officers swiping at protesters with batons. Security staff also tore down children's paintings and snapped a Palestinian flag, according to staff eyewitnesses."

It added, "Staff at Newcastle University... are demanding answers from bosses as to why an estimated 70 officers—including dog handlers—attended a peaceful building occupation in May, accusing them of 'inviting police brutality onto our campus'."

Sky News reported, "From footage obtained for our investigation from protesters who were there, more than 40 officers including dog handlers are seen attending a building being occupied by students. Dozens of officers were earlier seen pushing and struggling with crowds of agitated protesters outside the entrance, before drawing their batons as the police line collapsed and skirmishes broke out.

"Footage taken outside a different entrance to the university's Armstrong building shows police carrying and dragging limp protesters out of a building by their limbs. You can make out one student collapsing—who we found out was later taken to hospital by paramedics after having a fit."

Leicester University management claimed that last November students erected barricades that posed "a risk to life," leaving them with "no other option than to involve the police." Police then made a number of arrests on suspicion of aggravated trespass. The research found, "Six students have been subjected to police bail conditions such as a ban on visiting any UK campus other than for '[their] studies', and an 8 p.m. curfew which has since been lifted. Five reportedly remain temporarily excluded pending disciplinary investigations."

Bail conditions were impacting their education, said a member of the Leicester Action for Palestine group, as the students involved were "scared to go onto campus outside of lecture time, for example to use the library or to meet with tutors."

Universities now routinely monitor the political activity of students, involving not only collaboration with private security operations but also with firms specialising in collecting “intelligence,” and the counter-terrorism police.

Liberty Investigates notes that Oxford University received intelligence reports on pro-Palestine protest activity from private firm Horus Security Ltd, Oxford Brookes from private firm Mitie and that the two universities’ security teams share protest briefings with each other.

Suffolk University received advice from Counter Terror Policing after leaflets for a “March for Palestine” on 18 November 2023 were posted on campus, while police sent the University of South Wales a photo of protesters it was seeking to track down “in relation to the distribution of ... Palestine literature,” asking for help locating them. Palestine protest activity has been discussed by the universities of Bedfordshire and Chichester “at meetings held as part of the UK’s Prevent counter-terror programme.”

One of the most brutal crackdowns was at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). In October 2023, students walked out of lessons, with an encampment established later as one of more than a dozen across the country.

Liberty Investigates reported, “SOAS security compiled lists of students and staff activists involved in ‘unauthorised’ Palestine protests on 29 September and 9 October 2023... At least four of the students appeared to be highlighted for standing on the steps of the university’s main building as part of a group holding flags, their images circled in the dossier.”

Liberty Investigates points to the crackdown extending beyond the student body: “In London, anyone involved in unauthorised pro-Palestinian protests in the vicinity of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) risks breaching an injunction granted in October, which can result in prosecution for contempt of court and a potential two-year prison sentence...

“Other universities may also be following suit in tightening up their protest rules. Cardiff vice chancellor Wendy Larner informed staff last October the university was ‘developing a new procedure relating to the right for peaceful and lawful process [sic],’ according to internal documents seen by reporters.” A spokesperson “said the university was finalising guidance... on legal and peaceful protest” to “provide clarity on behaviours which are unacceptable.”

The crackdown seeks to criminalise left-wing, anti-capitalist sentiment against war and militarism. Members of left-wing groups and independent journalists have been arrested and charged, utilising anti-terrorism legislation passed by Labour and Conservative governments in

preparation for a general assault on the democratic rights of the working class.

A House of Commons Library paper, published February 2024, noted “over 900 protests occurring from 7 October 2023 to 6 December 2023,” including “public assemblies (such as sit-ins and vigils), and public processions (such as marches).”

Since the nominal “ceasefire” in Gaza, Sir Keir Starmer’s genocide-supporting government has doubled down on efforts to outlaw national anti-war marches in London.

On the January 18 March for Palestine, the Metropolitan Police refused to allow the protest to move out of the confines of the Whitehall road near Parliament and carried out 77 arrests, including a 10-man police snatch squad jumping and apprehending Chris Nineham, a leading figure in the Stop the War Coalition.

Two of the speakers at the rally—former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his former shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, both MPs, were subsequently requested to attend a police station to explain their actions on the day.

Other January 18 attendees, Stop the War Coalition officers Lindsey German, Alex Kenny and Andrew Murray, CND General Secretary Sophie Bolt, Friends of Al-Aqsa Chair Ismail Patel, actor Khalid Abdalla, and Stephen Kapos, an 87-year-old Jewish Holocaust survivor, were also asked to attend police interviews.

The planned March for Palestine set for March 15 was only allowed to proceed after the Met—in consultation with Zionist groups—banned it from assembling at Park Lane, a location used on many occasions, using the pretext that synagogues were nearby.



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