

SOAS students speak at London meeting for Momodou Taal: “It is startling the similarities that we face”

Our reporters
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A lively Q&A session followed speeches delivered at the May 31 public meeting in London hosted by the Socialist Equality Party (UK), “Trump’s war on free speech: The case of Momodou Taal”.

Taal is a British-Gambian citizen who was studying at Cornell University. He was forced to leave the US in March to escape detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents following his lawsuit that challenged US President Donald Trump’s decrees banning campus protests against the Gaza genocide.

Taal spoke at the meeting alongside his lawyer, Eric Lee. They were joined on the platform by Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States.

During the Q&A, students spoke from University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) student encampment, and from the Defend the SOAS 2 campaign who are fighting charges under the Terrorism Act (2000) for opposing Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

Their speeches have been edited slightly for publication.

Jacob, a student from the SOAS 2 campaign, spoke first in the discussion:

Thank you to Momodou Taal and the panel for speaking about the brazen attack on free speech across the pond in America. In relation to the SOAS 2, the World Socialist Web Site has done some excellent reporting on it so far. While it’s vital that we understand this sort of unfolding tyranny in the US and this question of freedom of speech, it is very much a sort of international dilemma. And while it’s not nearly as brazen in this country, it’s in many ways slightly more insidious in how it’s not expressed nearly as openly. I think in many ways it’s kind of a difference between Trump and Starmer in both their personalities and their strategy in attacking freedom of speech.

I think the SOAS 2 case illustrates this quite well. For those unaware, the SOAS 2 are two students who’ve been arrested, and one has been charged, under the Terrorism Act (2000), Section 12, for incitement of support for a proscribed organisation. So that means an organisation that the government, specifically the Home Office, has designated as a terrorist group. And it’s illegal to express really any opinion other than complete condemnation of an organisation, and it can carry up to 14 years in prison if found guilty.

Sarah, the student who has been charged, was arrested in January 2024 after a speech she allegedly gave in October 2023 at her own university, which is SOAS, on behalf of the SOAS Fight Racism, Fight Imperialism Society. She was accused of supporting a proscribed organisation in her

speech for iterating the internationally recognised right for oppressed and occupied peoples to use all means available to them to resist occupation.

And so obviously this right is iterated in Geneva Convention Additional Protocol 1, United Nations Resolution 3743, and even the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “where it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression”. So, I’m not a lawyer, but that doesn’t leave much room for interpretation in the case of Palestine.

It’s also worth noting she was reported to the police by the extremist Zionist cabal UK Lawyers for Israel, the same group which claimed that the famine in Gaza would increase life expectancy as it would decrease obesity. So yeah, lovely people who are sort of helping the British state here.

She was finally charged under Section 12 in March 2025, so 13 months after she was arrested. It’s also worth noting she is a French citizen and had her passport seized and was sort of intermittently not allowed to leave the country for those 13 months, and now she’s been charged she can’t leave the country again either.

While she went to the police station to get charged, another comrade who went to go support her was arrested the second their solicitor was out of sight, and was held in counter-terror custody for 10 hours. And he’s been released on bail and he hasn’t yet been charged, although it is expected he will be charged in the coming months.

If Sarah and the other comrade are convicted, they could face up to 14 years in prison, and this conviction would sort of spell disaster for the rest of the broader movement. It would mean that anyone who believes in international humanitarian law would be breaking British law, and it’s a clear attack on all our democratic rights. It came alongside the arrest of journalists like Asa Winstanley, although he wasn’t arrested but his devices were seized, and Sarah Wilkinson who was arrested, and Matt Kennard. It also came alongside the raid of the Quaker meeting house in March, which led to several charges against members of the group Youth Demand.

And so, while we obviously hear about the terrors of the Trump regime in the United States, it’s also imperative we kind of bring that message home, and I’m sure I’m preaching to the choir here on this point. Sarah does send her apologies and wishes she could be here, and we ask everyone to come support Sarah in the SOAS 2 campaign. On the 4th of July, she has a pre-trial hearing at the Old Bailey, the highest criminal court in the land, so they obviously care quite a lot about this repressing free speech.

I would ask everyone to come out on July 4th to support us. Me and my comrade Soma have a petition here, and we’ll help with all the petitioning and things like that if you want to. Anyway, thank you.

Abel, a student from the SOAS Liberated Zone encampment spoke in the discussion:

Thanks very much to the organizers for this important and timely discussion today, and the chance to be here, and also the contribution just made as well. It's really good to hear, especially from Momodou. We were in touch maybe six months ago in the height of the initial campaign.

To introduce myself, my name is Abel. I'm a part of the SOAS Liberated Zone, the student encampment at SOAS University just about 10 minutes' walk from here. It's been ongoing, inspired by that wave of encampments in the US from April '24. It's still going up there.

Listening to Momodou speak about the situation in universities in the US, it is startling the similarities that we face here, you know? And the crisis of legitimacy that UK universities have also faced, the dissent and opposition from students, and the attempts by those universities to maintain legitimacy and reputation, and repression being a very central part of maintaining that. We've seen the state of exception that Eric mentioned in regard to the law, has also been applied at a sort of administrative level by the universities, where disciplinary procedures have gone out the window.

Students have been suspended for months and months and months on end, with no basis of natural justice in university investigations. I myself was permanently excluded from the university. Haya, who is here, will hopefully make a contribution as well, has been suspended since August last year. And there's also been a number of court injunctions being put against the student campaign, preventing any kind of pro-Palestine activity on the land on which the university sits. So, very startling times and a clear escalation of oppression against that student movement.

I'm really happy to be here because I think it's important we have this meeting and this discussion, digesting what's happened and trying to find what is the way forward and what are the conclusions that we take. What have we learned of this past year of an explosion of activism and an explosion of oppression as well? One thing that's jumped out at me is the way that legal cases have been used in a tactical way. Obviously, we've just heard about the SOAS 2 case, it's a very important one. I remember seeing a video online of Eric speak, I think, outside of a courthouse, coming out and saying, actually, we know that justice won't be found inside these courts. These courts have always been used against our people, against our movements.

But there is a tactical reason to go in there and make that stand. I think that stand was very inspiring that Momodou's made. I guess one I'll bring attention to is the Riverway application that's been made in the UK. There's been an application to remove Hamas from the list of proscribed organizations in the UK. It's an application to the Secretary of State. I don't know how high the hopes of that case going through are. But it shifts the narrative. That kind of tactical use of law is something that we can learn from.

The SOAS 2 case is really important we support. We also have some cases we've brought against SOAS University. On 22nd of July, we've got an employment tribunal where SOAS and the Students' Union of SOAS stand accused of discriminating against anti-Zionist beliefs because of the dismissal of two elected student officers from the Students' Union. So there's a combination of campaigns in the court, but also building pressure outside.

I think the final speaker, Joseph, got into a really important point as well. Like we've seen this growth from students. I think there's got to be a question of where does it go from there, you know? Because absolutely, it cannot stay within the realm of student activism, actually looking to where is the social force that can take that energy from students out. And that's something that's going on all around the world. Just maybe a brief example is that tomorrow, the students from the Liberated Zone camp are

going to participate in a webinar with some students in South Africa where they've got a mass movement against repression, not directly connected to Palestine, but obviously they are strong supporters of the Palestinian cause. But they've had private security shooting students on their campus. And that's a struggle that sort of burst out of the university into the wider communities, into the population. And that's four o'clock, and you can find that on our SOAS Liberated Zone social medias.

I think there was a point about connecting to the working class, and I think absolutely that the repression that's come against us as students is coming for the rest of the working class. I think one example that jumps out at me is that, SOAS students faced an injunction. We're not allowed to protest on the university land. Now, people might know about the bin strike that's been going on in Birmingham for months now. And they've also actually recently been faced with a permanent injunction stopping them protesting and stopping the effects of that struggle. It's these kinds of instances, of how people understand the connections between what we're facing as students and what people in working class struggles are facing. I think we need to seize upon those connections and really strengthen them.

I don't want to go on for too long. I want to sort of put a question back. I'd really like to ask Momodou, now you've been forced out by this repression, but it has also in the same way blown up your case. And really, I think it's the kind of thing where all the repression that comes against us also does galvanize our movement, and does bring the visibility, and that's something we seize upon to grow. I think it was mentioned by the speaker as well. So yes, now you're back here, maybe in the principle of Basel al-Araj's text, *Exiting Law, Entering Revolution*, I guess I'd like to give you the opportunity to say, now you've been forced out of academia in some ways, where do you seek to apply yourself next, now you're back in London? And as part of that, I'd like to invite you, obviously, to the SOAS Liberated Zone as well, to be with us there. Thank you so much.

Haya, also from the SOAS liberated zone encampment, spoke in the discussion:

Thank you so much for coming. It's been amazing to hear from the panel, especially Momodou. I think I spoke to you as well with my comrade and brother Abel six months ago, so it's really nice to see you in person. There's a couple of things I wanted to talk about. I do have a question, but I wanted to talk a bit more about SOAS as well and why the camp started. Of course, we'd love to have you at the SOAS Liberated Zone, but it's important to note that we have seven demands. One of the most important demands is to cut ties with all Israeli academic institutions and to boycott them because SOAS have a partnership with Haifa University, which is built on colonized Palestinian land, and we shouldn't be endorsing these so-called educational institutions that profit off of Palestinian blood and uphold settler colonialism.

Also, obviously divestment, and stopping student repression. With the injunction, I think it's really important that people note that anyone associated with the SOAS Liberated Zone, with a named defendant—so that's Abel, our comrade Tara and myself—we are named defendants in the case. If we were to even hold a Palestinian flag, just us three, or go on campus and start chanting "Free Palestine", we'd be in contempt of court and possibly sanctioned up to two years in prison.

So SOAS have become a very authoritarian institution. The director, Adam Habib, has been silencing students since he's gotten here. I mean, Abel said he was permanently excluded. Tara and myself have been suspended for the entire year. I'm possibly facing expulsion as well, so there's a campaign for that. Obviously, talking about the wider context of

the British state, the Defend the SOAS 2 campaign is very, very important, along with the Filton 18 case, which is about 18 Palestine actionists who took action against an Elbit Systems facility last year, who have been imprisoned now for about 10 months, held without trial on remand, and their first trial starts in November, and they were upholding international law. The youngest of the Filton 18 being 19 years old when her home was raided.

Abel has flyers about our campaign, so if people can sign the petition, we'd really appreciate it. But for Momodou, I had a question. We have a lot of liberal Zionism within our institution, and oftentimes when we speak about Zionism, it's sort of only spoken about from the far-right lens or the most obvious type of Zionism that we see, but no one really talks about liberal Zionism, its effects, and how it divides and plagues the movement. We've had some people at SOAS say some very outrageous things about how we shouldn't sanction the Zionist entity because it's unethical to do so, even though they commit the most inhumane crimes and we're watching a live-streamed and documented genocide.

So I was wondering in the context of the US, how liberal Zionism has plagued the student movement there, and if you've seen any obvious examples of it, because oftentimes it's very hidden, but it's important for people to confront it, especially if we're talking about total liberation for the Palestinian people. And please come to the SOAS Liberated Zone, and thank you so much.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with Abel and Haya about the meeting.

Haya said, "We were happy to be here today and hear Eric Lee and Momodou talk about the oppression that Momodou Taal has faced in the United States and learnt how he filed a case against Donald Trump to defend his free speech.

"It was really important to hear the stories of the oppression that is happening, especially with the rise of fascism, specifically in the context of the US and also to know about the oppression and attacks against those in the Palestine movement, such as Mahmoud Khalil, who was not allowed to even hold his newborn son. He wasn't allowed to get his diploma and was deported by ICE for protesting the governments' genocide as a Palestinian.

"It was also good for people to hear that there is oppression here in the UK. My comrade Abel from SOAS wasn't allowed to graduate, for protesting the genocide, our comrade Tara and myself were suspended for the entire year and possibly leading to our expulsion, so I think it is really important that we connect our struggles. The tactics by both the US and the UK to try and silence protest and try and silence us isn't working. We are clearly having an impact for them to do what they are doing.

"We are continuing the work that needs to be done, to stop the genocide of the Palestinian people, there is no room for apathy.

Abel said, "We have had serious pressures piled against us, this made us realise that there is a mass opposition to the genocide, against the support that all countries are giving to the genocide. We are asking for compassion and support for the next steps and today's meeting was a good way to do that.

"Momodou's example has been very inspiring to people. The international campaign has been important and we need to continue our fight outside the courts to go forward. I am going to continue the pressure against SOAS and reach out for building an international network with our allies in the wider community and to workers, to organise and fight back and bring down the whole system that has allowed the genocide to take

place."



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