

# Defend University of London SOAS students, targeted for opposing genocide!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (UK)  
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IY SSE) calls on young people and workers in Britain and internationally to come to the defence of students at University of London's SOAS (School of African and Oriental Studies) who are being targeted in a state crackdown for opposing Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Millions of students have watched in horror as the Israeli state, backed by the US and Britain, commits mass murder and ethnic cleansing against a defenceless population, killing more than 84,000 Palestinians, including 17,000 children.

But while the perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity enjoy the political immunity and protection provided by the Trump administration and the Starmer Labour government, their opponents are being targeted, criminalized, and slandered as "terrorists".

The proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organization is an historic assault on the right to protest, free speech and freedom of assembly. For the first time in British history, a non-violent civil disobedience group has been proscribed as a terrorist organization, listed alongside ISIS, Al Qaeda and the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division. Membership of or support for Palestine Action is punishable by up to 14 years' imprisonment.

This assault was prepared over months by the systematic repression of anti-genocide protests on Britain's campuses. SOAS students were targeted by the state and by university authorities within days of the genocide launched on Gaza.

## SOAS: timeline of repression

In January 2024, counter-terrorism police arrested 19-year-old SOAS student Sarah in a pre-dawn raid on her home. Her crime? A speech on campus in October 2023, supporting Palestinians' right to self-determination. She was arrested by armed counter-terrorism police, who searched her belongings, seizing electronic equipment including phones and computers. In March this year, Sarah was formally charged under the Terrorism Act, and if found guilty faces up to 14 years' imprisonment.

A second SOAS student was arrested under the Terrorism Act in March this year, while he was waiting outside the police station where Sarah was being held. A counter-terrorism investigation into

the student is ongoing, and students fear he may be charged on the same grounds as Sarah.

Dozens more SOAS students and alumni have been suspended and/or barred from entering campus or issued with disciplinary warnings for joining campus protests against the Gaza genocide, and for demanding that SOAS end all ties to the Israeli state and military.

Elected student officials have been targeted. In March 2024, newly elected co-president and chair of the student union, Abel Harvie-Clark, was threatened with suspension unless he removed within 24-hours a banner in the student union calling for the sacking of SOAS Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib. In fact, security guards entered the student union and removed the banner themselves. Habib was formerly vice-chancellor at University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, where he called police against student protestors who were fired on with rubber bullets and stun grenades.

On July 15, Abel and Alex Cachinero Gorman, newly elected Sabbatical Officers at SOAS Students' Union received emails from the SU's Board of Trustees terminating their employment contracts. No evidence was entered against them by the Board, whose Trustees include former Foreign and Commonwealth Office official Elizabeth Wright. Both students were active in the student encampment for Gaza. They had called for changes to the structure of the SU, and for the removal of restrictions on the political activity of elected officers.

On July 28, University of London obtained a possession order to forcibly remove the SOAS student encampment for Gaza which had been established on May 6. On August 6, the university sent bailiffs to a second encampment at 6am to forcibly remove them once again, with students relocating to a third location, on the edge of university property.

On September 4, SOAS concluded a disciplinary process against Abel, permanently excluding him from the university. It was a kangaroo court. Abel was unable to attend his appeal hearing, after the university denied him access to legal support.

On October 28, University of London obtained an unprecedented High Court injunction naming Abel, Haya and Tara, alongside "persons unknown" and anyone involved with "Democratise Education", from protesting on the university's private land. It is the first such pre-emptive injunction to have been granted. As a result of this legal ruling, Tara and Haya, both fee-paying students, have been unable to access campus facilities for the entire

academic year.

After Tara's suspension expired, she visited campus on the same day as a protest to mark Nakba Day. Within one hour of the protest, her indefinite suspension was reinstated—evidence of how closely left-wing students are being surveilled. Members of left-wing and socialist groups who distribute leaflets or hold information stalls on campus are regularly filmed by uniformed security guards and plain-clothed individuals who refuse to disclose on whose authority they are acting.

## SOAS: the new normal?

If these measures are not defeated, universities will become institutions in which freedom of speech and the right to political association and protest are obliterated. Academic freedom will be rendered a dead letter, replaced by ideological conformity and outright censorship of opposing views.

By February, at least 113 students and staff were under disciplinary investigation at 23 universities for their pro-Palestinian activism, an investigation by Liberty and SkyNews found. Nine universities had received intelligence briefings on student protests by private security firms.

High Court injunctions banning protest have been extended to other universities including Cambridge. In June, Cardiff University obtained an injunction banning any protest by “unnamed persons” (i.e., anyone) unless application is made to university authorities 21-days in advance. In other words, protest is no longer a democratic right, but a privilege bestowed by the state on a case-by-case basis. Law firm Shakespeare Martineau has coached several universities on how to bring such clamp-down injunctions.

Students confront a politically coordinated assault. Following Home Secretary Yvette Cooper's order banning Palestine Action, Lord Walney, the UK Government's Orwellian sounding “Independent Adviser on Political Violence and Disruption”, has written to university vice-chancellors instructing them on measures to ensure compliance with the banning order.

He wrote, “With its formal proscription, the legal threshold has shifted: expressions of support, including wearing insignia, arranging meetings, or promoting the group's activities—whether knowingly or through naivety—now risk serious sanction with students at risk of acquiring a criminal record for a terror offence.” Indicating the pall of repression to come, the *Times* reported Walney instructing that, “UUK should review risk management protocols on student societies and public events where Palestine Action slogans or tactics could appear.”

Lord Walney issued a report last May, “Protecting our Democracy from Coercion”, commissioned by the Johnson government, which recommended Palestine Action's banning, describing it as a “Left-wing, Anarchist, Single-Issue Terrorist” group. Walney wrote that Palestine Action was “largely a part of the Far Left subculture in the UK: usually framed as anti-Zionism in support of Palestinians, it accuses Israel of imperialism, colonialism, and oppression; and its antisemitism is often

presented in connection with anti-capitalist conspiracy theories, such as the antisemitic trope of Jewish bankers controlling the globe.”

Walney's baseless claims of left-wing antisemitism are a libel aimed at silencing and repressing left-wing and socialist ideas. Both historically and today, it is the far-right that serves as the fountainhead for antisemitism, promoting fascist and national-chauvinist ideology in defence of the same capitalist system that produced two world wars and fascism in the 20th century.

The repression on campuses is the spearhead for measures being prepared for use against the entire working class. State repression is being readied to deal with the strikes and mass protests that will erupt against the Starmer government's brutal austerity being unleashed to pay for military rearmament and to fund imperialist war plans targeting Russia and China.

The Labour government's strike-breaking operation against Birmingham bin workers is a warning of this, with a High Court injunction criminalizing pickets, enforced by police, and military planners drafted by Labour to help break the strike. The workers, fighting annual pay cuts of £8,000 and abolition of the safety-critical drivers' assistant role, are being criminalised.

In defining Palestine Action as a terrorist organization, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper cited the group's “attacks against businesses” that were a threat to “national security”. But if it is terrorism for individual protestors to take non-violent action against a business, what of strikes by dockworkers or by transport and logistics workers?

Students cannot defeat these repressive measures on their own. Campaigns must be organized at factories and workplaces to alert working people to the overturn of democratic rights on campus and appeal for support. A mass party of the working class must be built to fight for socialism, reallocating society's resources to provide for social need not war, genocide and corporate profit.



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