

SOAS student charged with terrorism: “All I ever did was speak about a right that Palestinians have under international law”

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On Friday, Sarah Cotte, a student from University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) appeared at London’s Central Criminal Court (the Old Bailey) charged with terrorism offences for speaking out on campus against the Gaza genocide.

Sarah is 21 years old and completing a master’s degree in international development. She was charged under Section 12 of the Terrorism Act (2000) on March 4 this year, for a speech she gave at SOAS in October 2023 as a member of the Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! student society, condemning the Gaza genocide and defending the right of the Palestinian people to resist Israel’s illegal occupation.

Police allege Sarah was “inviting support for a proscribed organisation”, i.e., Hamas. The charge carries a maximum penalty of 14 years’ imprisonment.

A guilty verdict would criminalise free speech and assembly in defence of the Palestinians on university campuses across Britain.

On the day Sarah was charged, police arrested her comrade, who was standing outside Hammersmith police station waiting for her release. Eyewitnesses say the student was targeted for holding Sarah’s bag, which contained her phone and other personal items later impounded by police. Together, they are known as the SOAS 2.

Friday’s preliminary hearing set a court date of June 5, 2026, for full legal arguments over expert evidence. Sarah spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* and explained why her case matters for students and the working class.

WSWS: Sarah, can you explain the purpose of today’s hearing?

Sarah: We’ve asked legal jurists and academics to produce reports for my defence on two key issues in my case. One is the international right of occupied peoples, and specifically the Palestinian people, to resist occupation, including (through) armed struggle. The other point is about the resistance in Palestine, the different groups which make up the resistance, the history of the resistance, and the different political trends within it.

Both are important in setting the political context, but also our right to support the resistance in Palestine as solidarity activists here in Britain. The prosecution will argue that these reports are irrelevant, inadmissible, and don’t relate to the matter at hand. We need to broaden the scope of the debate. It’s not a mistake that I’ve been prosecuted, and it’s certainly not because the British state has a real concern that I might be a terrorist. It’s because of British support for Zionism. It’s because of British imperialism.

WSWS: Can you speak about your involvement in protesting the genocide and the kind of political statements being designated as

terrorist activity.

Sarah: The terrorism designation is, first off, a racist designation against the Palestinian people. It’s used to delegitimise their struggle. It sets up the groundwork for Israel to then exterminate basically all the Palestinians in Gaza, right? They’re all terrorists, and if they’re children, well, they will grow up and be terrorists, so they’re a threat that needs to be dealt with.

We need to be clear. We are speaking about resistance fighters and freedom fighters. That’s what the vast majority are doing in terms of fighting back against Israel’s illegal occupation, genocide, and so on.

When we look at the history of terrorism legislation in Britain today, I was arrested and charged under the Terrorism Act 2000, but that came out of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which is much older and was put in place in reaction to the liberation struggle in the occupied north of Ireland. That wasn’t put in place to make violence against civilians illegal, because there’s already so much existing legislation which does that. It was to make illegal support across Britain for the Irish people, for Irish liberation.

In 2000, the Blair [Labour] government extended those powers to make illegal, support for a whole host of different causes and national liberation movements. So that’s how we’re seeing that support for the Palestinian people, support for the Kurdish people and so on can be amalgamated into terrorism. That’s why we are calling for the scrapping of the Terrorism Act 2000. It does nothing to protect us against violence. All it does is provide the tools for the state to attack working class people, attack students, attack people who rise up against Zionism and British imperialism.

WSWS: Are you the first university student to ever be charged under this legislation?

Sarah: To my knowledge, I am. We’ve seen loads of repression across university campuses, whether that be at SOAS, whether that be at Kings College London, for example, with Usama [Ghanem], who’s potentially facing the removal of his visa and being sent back to Egypt, which is horrific, and we need to organise against that. But I think it’s a new height in terms of state repression to have young people, international students, with no track record of causing trouble, to be charged under this legislation. What we’re seeing is more “respected professionals”, people like journalists and lawyers in “respectable society”, who are being attacked with this legislation. So, the way we fight that is with solidarity as a movement. We need to defend the resistance, the right to defend Palestine, and we need to organise as a working class, as solidarity activists, as socialists, as anti-imperialists, to fight back against British imperialism.

WSWS: Can I ask you to discuss the initial circumstances of your arrest back in January 2024?

Sarah: When I was arrested, four months had already passed since my initial offense. The reason why it took so long was because the Zionists were the ones who essentially brought the case to the attention of the Metropolitan Police and who drafted up, you know, a whole case for them, so that they wouldn't have to do any police work and they could just come up to my flat and arrest me. It was on January 31, at around 7am, when seven police officers showed up at my flat.

They go through my possessions, my devices, political literature, political leaflets, my keffiyeh. They spend their time looking through my things even after I've been taken to the police station. It's a scary and violating experience to know that the police can show up at anyone's door and arrest you and take you away, and there's nothing you can do about it.

WSWS: You were not charged until March of this year?

Sarah: I was charged over a year and two months after my initial arrest. We knew when coming to the police station on March 4 that I was going to get charged. What we couldn't predict though is that one of my comrades would get arrested the same day—that's how we became the SOAS 2. That comrade is also a student from SOAS. They were arrested while supporting me outside the police station. So, while I answered my bail, while I was getting charged, my comrade was outside waiting for me to come back out, but I never saw them again that day because the police had arrested them by the time I was finished. And we later learned that while they were being arrested, their flat was being raided by the police.

Twelve police officers showed up at their flat, seized political literature, seized their keffiyeh, looked around all their things, and seized their devices as well. They were arrested under Section 12 of the Terrorism Act, like myself. But they've not been charged yet.

WSWS: What happened when you were being interrogated?

Sarah: They start off trying to convince you that they are your friend and they'll say, I mean, for me specifically, saying things like, "Well, you're a nice young girl, you go to this good university, you've come here from France and so on, and we know you don't want to be in trouble. We know this is scary for you. So, if you cooperate, it'll be done quickly, and you can go back home, and this can all be over." They're really trying to pull on your heartstrings, your feelings, because at that point you're feeling isolated. You've been in the police station for hours. You might not have gotten to speak to a member of your family or a close friend to explain your situation and get some reassurance. They say this knowing that everything you say will be used against you.

If you're a political person who knows not to say anything to the police, then they'll get much more straightforward about what their intentions are and say things which you obviously didn't say. So in my case, I remember the police saying things like, "Do you know what Hamas did on the 7th of October, raping women, killing babies, and so on. Do you support that? Do you support the killing of all Jews? Do you support the violent destruction of Israel?" And they say these things to elicit a reaction out of you. So even shaking your head, no, will be used as saying something, and whatever you give them, they'll then turn that against you. It's an intimidating experience. It's an isolating experience.

WSWS: Would you be able to speak about the political context of your initial arrest in January 2024?

Sarah: It's a general trend that we've seen in British politics and

successive governments have tried, unfortunately successfully, to restrict the right to protest and to express dissent in general. There's been opposition to that, for example with the Kill the Bill protest, but never on the scale there should have been. In universities and schools, Prevent [forcing teachers to report signs of "radicalisation" to police] is also a very big tool in discouraging young people, students from being vocal about their political opinions, from politicizing themselves. And when they are vocal, when they are political, being referred to authorities, being criminalized, and so on.

Labour have not broken at all from this kind of trend initiated by the Tories. If anything, the climate has grown more repressive in the past year with more and more people being arrested, being charged, being convicted, and obviously the proscription of Palestine Action. Everybody should feel concerned by this. Everybody should really be afraid, even people who don't care about Palestine or who don't care about what's happening in the Middle East. They should at the very least be concerned about their democratic rights and what's happening to them at this moment right now.

WSWS: The full hearing of your case is next year. If you are found guilty, what is the maximum penalty and what would be the broader repercussions?

Sarah: The full hearing of my trial will formally start the week beginning June 22, 2026. That feels like a long time away, but it'll be here very, very soon. The maximum penalty I could get is 14 years of prison time, which is incredibly harsh. But more serious is the precedent it would set for expressions of support for the Palestinian resistance being treated as illegal speech under the Terrorism Act 2000, as expressions of support for proscribed organizations. We must fight back against this, because it would restrict our freedom of speech even further. The repercussions on the movement here would be far ranging and dangerous. We need to bring more awareness to these cases. All I ever did was speak about a right that the Palestinians have under international law, and for that I could go to prison.

Readers of the World Socialist Web Site are urged to sign the petition in defence of the SOAS 2, demanding the dropping of all charges.

Organisations and individuals can add their name to the following open letter to the Crown Prosecution Service.



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