

Momodou Taal detained and interrogated by UK police at Heathrow Airport

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On Friday, UK police used “anti-terror” powers at Heathrow Airport to detain, interrogate and profile pro-Palestinian activist and Cornell University graduate student Momodou Taal in a blatant act of political intimidation directed against his outspoken opposition to the Gaza genocide.

According to Taal’s account published on X, three officers were waiting for him as he stepped off his flight at Heathrow and immediately informed him he was being detained under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000. He was then held and interrogated for six hours, the maximum permitted period, with officers insisting the operation was about “keeping the UK safe,” a claim Taal correctly denounced as absurd.

During the examination, officers subjected him to a sweeping fishing expedition into his personal and political life, questioning him about his childhood, religious background, mosque attendance, friendships and political views. His phone and laptop were seized, his DNA taken and retained, and he was explicitly told that under Schedule 7 he had no right to remain silent, with refusal to answer questions criminalized.

Taal stressed that this was already his fourth return to Britain since leaving the United States, underscoring that nothing in his conduct justified the sudden deployment of terror powers at the border.

Taal linked the Heathrow detention to months of escalating repression since he participated in anti-genocide protests at Cornell University, including harassment by US immigration authorities and punitive measures by the university administration.

Taal wrote in his statement:

The majority of questions were about my personal history, not my political views. At one point, I was even asked whether I had read Karl Marx. This was not a serious counterterrorism inquiry. It was a racist fishing expedition designed to intimidate and punish someone for advocating freedom and opposing mass slaughter.

This detention comes after months of targeted repression. In April, I was forced to flee the United States after ICE agents pursued me just days after I filed a historic legal challenge alleging that the Trump administration had violated my First Amendment rights. Shortly after taking office, Trump vowed to deport international students who participated in peaceful protests in support of Palestinians—a policy later ruled unlawful by US courts. Before that, in September, I was suspended by Cornell University for participating in peaceful pro-Palestine protests. I have never been accused of, let alone charged with, any crime.

Pointing to likely intelligence-sharing between British and US agencies, he added:

Powerful institutions on both sides of the Atlantic that support genocide do not want their dirty linen aired in public. The UK needs to come clean about what it knows and why I was detained. Did the Americans ask authorities in the UK—the submissive partner in the so-called “special relationship” to stop and interrogate me?

The Terrorism Act 2000 is the UK’s core framework for state “counter-terrorism” powers, enacted by a Labour government as part of the escalation of repressive legislation in the run-up to and aftermath of the so-called “war on terror.” Section 1 defines “terrorism” in sweeping terms as the use or threat of action involving serious violence, serious damage to property, danger to life, serious risk to public health or safety, or serious interference with electronic systems, where such action is intended to influence government or intimidate the public “for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.”

The deliberately vague definition has provided the legal foundation for a battery of powers aimed at criminalizing political activity and protest under the charge of “extremism.” Schedule 7, under which Taal was held, grants police, immigration and customs officers the authority to stop, question, detain and search anyone passing through UK ports and borders to determine whether they “appear” to be someone that is or has been “concerned” in the commission, preparation or instigation of terrorism.

Officers do not need any prior suspicion at all to exercise these powers, making Schedule 7 a regime of lawless border interrogation. Schedule 7 permits detention for up to six hours beginning from the start of questioning, the searching of the person and all property including electronic devices, compulsory provision of device passwords and unlocking, seizure and copying of data, and taking and retention of fingerprints and DNA, which can be uploaded to the same databases used for convicted terrorists.

Individuals must answer all questions and provide documents on demand; refusal or obstruction constitutes a criminal offence, even though anything said under questioning generally cannot be used as evidence in later criminal proceedings.

Civil liberties organizations have warned for years that Schedule 7 violates basic due process and privacy rights and has been used as a tool of racial and religious profiling, disproportionately targeting Muslims and people of Asian and other minority backgrounds. It has been noted that around 70 percent of those stopped at UK ports under anti-terrorism legislation, including Schedule 7, since 2021, have been from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

In the landmark case involving the detention of David Miranda, partner of journalist Glenn Greenwald, the Court of Appeal ruled that the use of Schedule 7 against him was incompatible with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights because of the lack of safeguards against arbitrary interference with free expression.

These powers are being maintained as a permanent infrastructure for the state to monitor, intimidate and, where it deems necessary, criminalize political opposition to imperialist war crimes. The Heathrow detention of Taal is a use of this machinery against someone who has denounced the US-backed Israeli genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.

In his statement, Taal also connected the attack on his rights to the broader international political context, writing:

My detention also comes in the same week it emerged that the United Nations raised serious concerns with Cornell University over alleged human rights violations committed against me and another international student following our participation in pro-Palestine protests.

UN Special Rapporteurs warned that universities are undergoing structural changes to systematically repress expressions of solidarity with Palestine, creating a climate of fear and intimidation. Students are self-censoring, and international students in particular are withdrawing from activism out of fear of deportation.

The US and UK have a long and sordid history of intelligence sharing in the service of human rights abuses. Earlier this month, the UK government implicitly acknowledged its complicity in the rendition and torture of Abu Zubaydah, a Palestinian Guantanamo Bay detainee held and tortured in a CIA black site between 2002 and 2006. The UK settled the case out of court, paying a substantial sum, after years of denying involvement.

What happened to me at Heathrow fits squarely within that history. This was not about safety. It was about silencing dissent. And it will not work.

Momodou Taal is a 31-year-old Gambian-British citizen who emerged as a prominent representative of the student and youth activists who were radicalized by the Gaza genocide and the eruption of imperialist violence around the world. Holding dual nationality in the United Kingdom and Gambia, he pursued graduate studies at Cornell University in the United States, where he also worked as an instructor.

At Cornell, Taal became a critic of Israel's assault on Gaza and of the bipartisan US support for the massacre, participating in pro-Palestinian demonstrations and speaking publicly against the war. His prominence made him a central target of a coordinated campaign by right-wing media, Zionist organizations and university authorities seeking to brand all opposition to the genocide as "antisemitic" or "support for terrorism." In this context, his immigration status as an international student was used by the US state to turn his right to remain in the country into a cudgel to force his silence.

Cornell twice suspended Taal—in April and September 2024—for his participation in campus protests, while carefully calibrating the formal sanctions so as not to trigger immediate visa revocation. University officials allowed him to continue remotely, with full access to be restored only in spring 2025, creating a protracted limbo that left him vulnerable to attack by the state while ostensibly keeping him "enrolled."

As the anti-genocide movement spread, the Trump administration launched a vendetta against Taal's legal status and attempted to deport him. He filed a lawsuit challenging Trump's executive orders targeting pro-Palestinian protesters, a case that posed a direct constitutional challenge to the administration's attempt to criminalize political opposition under the guise of immigration enforcement.

In response, federal authorities intensified surveillance and intimidation: law enforcement agents from an unidentified agency were repeatedly seen parked outside his Ithaca residence; one individual, when confronted by

staff from his former residence at Telluride House, displayed a law enforcement badge before leaving the private property.

Taal's attorneys warned a federal judge that the government was preparing to detain him preemptively and remove him to a distant jurisdiction, citing the precedent of other activists such as Mahmoud Khalil who had been seized in New York and transported to remote immigration prisons hundreds of miles away from their legal counsel.

Their fears were confirmed when the Justice Department informed them that Immigration and Customs Enforcement was "inviting" Taal to appear at an HSI office in Syracuse to be personally served with a Notice to Appear and to surrender to ICE custody.

Faced with the imminent threat of incarceration and deportation before his legal challenge could be heard, Taal made the difficult decision to leave the United States and return to Britain rather than walk into ICE custody. His departure was a tactical withdrawal forced on him by the state's attempt to strip him of even the possibility of a legal defense.

It is precisely this act—refusing to submit quietly to an obviously political deportation—that US and UK authorities are now seeking to punish through continued harassment at the border.

The use of Schedule 7 against Taal at Heathrow underscores the active collaboration between the British state and the Trump administration in hounding a politically targeted opponent of genocide and imperialist war. The same governments that arm and politically support Israel's destruction of Gaza and participate in US-led wars around the world are now using "anti-terrorism" and immigration regimes in an attempt to intimidate and silence those who denounce these crimes.

By treating a returning British citizen—whose supposed "offence" consists of opposing mass murder and challenging anti-democratic executive orders—as a terror suspect at the border, the UK government is signaling its willingness to function as an extension of the Trump administration's anti-democratic rampage. Taal's Heathrow detention is intended as a warning: anyone who refuses to be browbeaten into silence on the question of free speech and the defense of the Palestinians will be subjected to arbitrary detention, profiling and the permanent association with "terrorism."



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