

# Private security firm staffed by former military officers contracted to spy on UK students

Alex Brown  
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A joint *Al Jazeera/Liberty Investigates* investigation has revealed that private security firm Horus Security was paid over £440,000 to monitor students at 12 UK universities between January 2022 and March 2025.

The firm offers a range of services, including real-time monitoring and periodic digests sent to universities. Horus gathers data from social media posts as well as deep web databases, meaning the information is hidden from search engines and so, while accessible, not public.

*Al Jazeera* reports that Horus is paid roughly £900 a month by universities specifically to compile “encampment updates”, which use the information to identify students. This shows how far university administrations are prepared to go to criminalise political opposition on campuses.

PhD student Lizzie Hobbs only discovered she was under surveillance when reporters from *Al Jazeera* reached out to her for comment. She had been flagged in a Horus briefing to the London School of Economics (LSE), after she took part in an encampment calling for the university to divest from Israeli-linked companies.

She described the spying as “deeply scary”, adding that she “knew surveillance was happening by the university, but it is shocking to see how systematised it is.”

Visiting academics have also been targeted. Professor Rabab Abdulhadi, a Palestinian studies scholar invited to speak at Manchester Metropolitan University was subject to Horus’s counter-terror “threat assessment”.

This is only the latest example of the police-state apparatus established on campus in response to protests by students and academics against the Gaza genocide.

In early 2025, *Sky News* and *Liberty Investigates* found that at least 40 universities had discussed protest activity with police forces, including counter-terror police, or private intelligence organisations. At least 113 students and staff were investigated as a result, across 28 institutions.

A further 47 universities refused to disclose information to *Liberty Investigates* under the Freedom of Information Act.

Surveillance and investigation is the start of a process leading to heavily securitised events and punishments designed to make an example of protesters. Universities have used intelligence to support disciplinary cases, evict encampments and obtain sweeping injunctions—including against “persons unknown”, preemptively denying the right to protest on pain of up to two years’ imprisonment and fines of up to £2,500.

SOAS University of London has been a focus point for repression, with multiple students suspended, excluded and legally barred from accessing campus—in a series of arbitrary and unaccountable rulings. One student has been charged with terror offences for insisting on the Palestinians’ legal right to resist Israeli occupation.

Across the UK as many as 65 students and staff faced disciplinary action in 2024. Those subjected to surveillance and disciplinary procedures describe an atmosphere of intimidation and fear, with many reporting severe anxiety, burnout and pressure to abandon political activity altogether.

Surveillance and suppression of students’ political activity is part of a broad assault on anti-war, anti-genocide sentiment and the democratic rights of the working class. It is the home front of British imperialism’s wars and support for wars abroad.

This fact is underscored by Horus’s leadership team, drawn from the elites of Britain’s armed forces. It includes former Military Intelligence Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Whiteley, Colonel Tim Collins OBE and David Yates MBE.

Collins was a colonel in the SAS and is a founding signatory of the far-right US Henry Jackson Society. He was investigated for the abuse of detainees during the Iraq War, following allegations from a US Army Major. The British Ministry of Defence cleared him.

He has said that outrage over the Gaza genocide is the product of a “Russian/Iranian orchestrated media campaign” and that protesters who “misbehave” should “face the full consequences of the law ... and those people who are not

from this country should be deported until they can never come back”.

Both Collins and Whitely, who states that he worked at different times for all of Britain’s intelligence agencies (MI5, MI6 and GCHQ), were commended in connection with British imperialism’s wars in Northern Ireland and Iraq.

The employment of these counter-insurgency specialists in domestic policing shows the ruling class sees political opposition as a critical threat. Horus’s surveillance takes place in the context of the police crackdown of anti-genocide demonstrations, the proscription of Palestine Action and mass arrests of protesters.

The extent of the surveillance and repression carried out on the campuses underscores how important a battlefield they are. Universities are intellectual centres for the ruling class, and movement on campus have frequently been a trigger for broader movements in the working class.

However, no opposition to the attacks on students’ democratic rights has been organised by the student or trade unions or the parliamentary “lefts”. The National Union of Students (NUS) has been silent throughout the repression of the last years.

Leader of the University and College Union (UCU) Jo Grady issued a single social media post declaring it “is shameful that universities have wasted hundreds of thousands of pounds spying on their own students,” as if “waste” is the major issue!

Jeremy Corbyn, leader of Your Party, told *Middle East Eye*, “Britain is becoming a surveillance state,” describing the Horus scandal as “yet another disturbing example of an increasingly draconian crackdown on Palestinian solidarity.”

He is one to talk, having recently completed an anti-socialist witch-hunt of his own party, and rolled over in front of the campaign using accusations of antisemitism to persecute opposition to the Israeli state. His oppositional statements will never be accompanied by a call for any serious political mobilisation.

Nor should students be taken in by the Labour government’s grossly misnamed Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, inherited from the Tories, which became law in August 2025. It is a bipartisan project to protect right-wing speakers against protestors—especially in the case of action against the Gaza genocide—and to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment.

The BBC reports in its article on the subject that “China’s influence on freedom of speech, including academic research” has “been a concern”.

When the government announced the implementation of the Act in April, it did so alongside the declaration that it would be “investing £3 million in a package of measures to

tackle foreign interference, including a new Academic Interference Reporting Route,” following on from “a briefing from MI5 and the National Cyber Security Centre for Vice Chancellors and senior leaders at over 70 UK universities”.

Underscoring the reactionary character of the Act, the director of free speech at the Office for Students (OfS), appointed by the Tories, is Arif Ahmed. In 2016-17, Ahmed was a member of an academic network headed by the far-right “intellectual” Peter Thiel. He campaigned heavily to have right-wing crank Jordan Peterson given a visiting fellowship at Cambridge.

From April 2027, the OfS will be able to fine universities no less than £500,000 or 2 percent of a university’s income for breaching the act—anything up to £62 million in the case of the richest, Oxford University.

The head of Universities UK, Prof Malcolm Press, made clear institutions would proactively use the Act to police their students: “We will support our members to comply with the new regulations.”

Students must organise to expose and oppose the security apparatus on campus. Their democratic rights to political expression, association and assembly have been left exposed by the unions and “left” political parties to a ruling-class offensive in support of war and genocide. This assault will only intensify with the spread of war in the Middle East, now engulfing Iran and Lebanon, and across the world.

Defending these rights is inseparable from the development of a socialist movement against imperialism, uniting students, educators and workers across every campus. This is the fight being waged by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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