

SOAS graduate Sarah Cotte defends free speech during trial on terrorism charges

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A jury has been discharged following a trial at the Old Bailey in London in the case of Sarah Cotte, a 22-year-old School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) graduate charged under Section 12(1A) of the Terrorism Act (2000). Prosecutors allege that her support for the Palestinian resistance equates to support for Hamas, banned by the UK government under the Terrorism Act.

Cotte's "crime," according to the prosecution, was a speech she delivered at SOAS on October 9, 2023, just two days after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was launched from Gaza and amidst massive retaliatory bombardment by Israel, in which she defended the Palestinian people's right to resist occupation. Cotte was secretary of the college's Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! (FRFI) society.

For her speech, she was arrested in a dawn raid on January 31, 2024, interrogated, doxxed, and subjected to a two-year ordeal culminating in an eight-day trial, and now, a retrial. The date for retrial has been set for September 14, 2026.

Not a single mainstream journalist reported on the court proceedings. A week-long trial of a student charged with terrorism for speech on campus against genocide has unfolded in near-total silence.

The trial has been marked by repeated judicial interventions, aggressive prosecution tactics, and an unnecessarily heavy police presence. Virtually every day, a Gold Command public order operation has been deployed against a vocal but entirely peaceful FRFI-organised demonstration.

Judge Richard Marks KC opened proceedings on June 22 by telling jurors that the case against Cotte was "relatively straightforward." He dismissed a prospective juror for having studied the Israel-Palestine conflict at university—rejecting defence arguments that knowledge does not equal bias. The judge insisted that any juror with "strong views" should declare them immediately. This set the tone for a trial in which political context was repeatedly declared "irrelevant," even as the prosecution relied on insinuation, selective framing, and the criminalisation of political speech.

Prosecutor Frederick Hookway rehearsed the charges and timeline: Cotte's speech on October 9; FRFI WhatsApp messages exchanged on October 16; and her refusal to give police the passwords for her phone and laptop. The prosecution made great play of this, suggesting it was evidence of guilt—even though Cotte had simply followed her solicitor's advice to answer "no comment."

The prosecution argued that Cotte had expressed support for "Palestinian armed resistance" whilst being careful or clever not to mention Hamas. Her having drawn activists' attention to Home Secretary Suella Braverman's October 10, 2023 guidance to Chief Constables—encouraging police to interpret broad expressions of Palestinian solidarity as terrorism-related offences—was framed as further "craftiness."

A Counter-Terrorism Detective Inspector testified he led the team that sifted through WhatsApp messages between Cotte and her partner Jacob Winter about how they should respond to the Hamas attack. He described

how Cotte's speech was later reposted by the anonymous account @gnasherjew, triggering the police investigation.

Under cross-examination, the detective admitted he had not interviewed SOAS staff or security despite the speech occurring on campus. This was significant because SOAS principal, Professor Adam Habib, had declined to sanction Cotte, insisting at the time that, "All in our community will be allowed their freedom of expression and action which will only be circumscribed by our common commitment not to condone hate speech, antisemitism, Islamophobia, [sic] or any other form of cultural or disciplinary chauvinism."

The police had also not attempted to have the supposedly "inflammatory and illegal" video removed from @gnasherjew's account, where it remains visible. When asked why the video was still online, he replied, "It's not in my purview to take it down." The judge intervened to shield him from further questioning.

The prosecution produced not a shred of evidence of Cotte expressing support for Hamas. As the defence summarised: "All they could produce were flags, scarves and political pamphlets unconnected to Hamas."

A document of "agreed facts" between the prosecution and defence inadvertently strengthened the defence. It acknowledged that the right to self-determination allows resistance, including military action, under international law. It also referenced the history of the Intifada, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and settler violence; that Hamas's military wing was proscribed in 2001 and its political wing only in 2023; that multiple Palestinian groups, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), participated on October 7; and that Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority and Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), had said people had a right to defend themselves against settlers and IDF. This context made the prosecution's claim—that any reference to Palestinian resistance was covert support for Hamas—appear absurd.

Cotte's testimony on day four of the trial posed serious difficulties for the prosecution. Under questioning, she explained her political beliefs with confidence, precision and moral seriousness. Cotte told the court she did not agree with the killing of civilians but insisted that Palestinians have the right to defend themselves via military action, a right recognised under international law. Civilian deaths, she said, are regrettable but inevitable in any armed struggle—as occurred on October 7.

Cotte challenged the mainstream media's framing of October 7 as a "Hamas attack." Although Hamas led the operation, several other groups and unaffiliated individuals were involved, including the PFLP—an avowedly secular, socialist organisation not proscribed by the British government whose politics were closer to her own. The media's branding of October 7 solely as a "Hamas attack," she argued, was part of its branding of all Palestinians as fanatical Muslim terrorists, erasing the reality that Hamas is just one strand of a much broader coalition known as the Palestinian Resistance.

Cotte refused to accept that anyone present at the October 9 rally could

have been influenced by her speech to support Hamas. Most attendees were SOAS students—politically informed, aware of the situation, and fully conscious that Palestinian resistance is far broader than Hamas. “Anyone supporting Hamas would not have been there,” she said.

The October 16 WhatsApp conversation, in an FRFI group chat, was prompted by a tweet by *Guardian* journalist Owen Jones that was shared. Cotte objected to Jones’s equating the violence of Palestinian resistance to occupation with the violence of the Israeli state, IDF and settlers. She reminded the court that under international law, the takeover of Palestinian homes by settlers and the eviction of Palestinians in occupied territories are illegal—not matters of opinion, but established findings of the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, and human rights bodies.

The prosecution read transcripts of Cotte’s police interviews from January 31, 2024 and October 24, 2024. She had answered “no comment” throughout—on the advice of her solicitor and because she distrusted the police. The prosecution attempted to portray this as a ploy to concoct a story, but the defence made clear that Cotte’s silence was legally advised and entirely legitimate.

As the trial progressed, the prosecution’s arguments became increasingly strained. Hookway insisted Cotte’s speech was a “smokescreen for Hamas,” claiming it could have influenced listeners or those on WhatsApp. She should have “specifically excluded Hamas” in her speech—a demand exposing the political nature of the prosecution. Cotte responded consistently: as someone living in the West, she did not have the right to tell Palestinians living under siege, occupation and genocide what to do, or whom to support.

In a moment that exposed the weakness of the prosecution’s case, Hookway attempted to criminalise Cotte’s use of capital letters. He challenged her use of the term “Palestinian Resistance” — capital P, capital R — insisting that “linguistics are important.” In doing so, he appeared to forget that the French Resistance was itself a broad coalition encompassing hundreds of organisations: political parties, trade unions, student and Jewish groups, and Maquis guerrilla formations.

Considering Jones’ comments that the 7 October attacks were the biggest massacre of Jews since the holocaust, Cotte told the court she considered the October 7 attack more comparable to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19–May 16, 1943) than to the Holocaust. She explained that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first major urban revolt against Nazi rule, in which Jewish resistance fighters — mainly members of Zionist youth movements — launched an armed uprising against extermination, supported by the Polish Home Army and the communist-aligned People’s Guard.

She reiterated that armed resistance against occupation and genocide is legitimate. This historical framing exposed the prosecution’s attempt to reduce Palestinian resistance to Hamas as politically motivated and intellectually dishonest.

Character witness statements were taken from Cotte’s parents, high school friends, and university teachers. All testified to her exceptional intelligence, empathy, compassion, integrity and honesty. None had ever witnessed her supporting Hamas. Her mother, Fitsum, fighting back tears, described how her daughter—“resembling so much like me” and adhering to the family value of respect for human beings—would go to her hospital aged 10 to help sick children understand their diseases. Her father, Thierry, spoke proudly of how his eight-year-old daughter learned perfect English during two years in the United States.

The defence presented extensive evidence testifying to Cotte’s honesty because the prosecution was trying to prove she supported Hamas but kept it quiet.

A poignant moment came when Maxine Daniels, a Jewish landlord who rented an apartment to Cotte, took the stand. Intrigued after hearing Cotte had been charged with terrorism, she ended up befriending her—describing

her as thoughtful and “just nice,” inviting her to Friday night Shabbat dinner and a family party, “quite a big thing for a Jewish family.”

On Monday, Judge Marks delivered his legal summary of the trial—a speech that revealed the political stakes more clearly than anything the prosecution had said. He began by reminding jurors of the context of the case—October 7—insisting that what came before is irrelevant. In doing so, he enacted precisely what Cotte had warned against: erasing decades of occupation, siege, and settler violence that form the backdrop to Palestinian resistance. “Ignoring what comes before,” Cotte had said, “falls into the narrative that Israel is pursuing.”

The judge then spoke in detail, recreating the events of October 7, emphasising the killing of innocent people, particularly women and children, and repeating the media’s framing of a singular “Hamas attack.” He did not mention that many of the most lurid claims—beheaded babies, mass rapes—were later shown to be untrue. His argument was circular: because “most people thought it was a Hamas attack,” anyone hearing Cotte’s speech “could be encouraged to support Hamas.”

Munro Kerr’s closing speech was a model of clarity. She told jurors they must be “10 out of 10 sure” of guilt to convict—nothing less; that the case was not about agreeing with Cotte’s politics; that “Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin were in an alliance in WW2 but had very different politics”; and that if Cotte’s speech was truly dangerous, why was the video still online on @gnasherjew? She insisted that the prosecution had found no evidence whatsoever of Cotte proclaiming support for Hamas. Munro Kerr concluded that the prosecution’s strategy was to “scare” Cotte—to make her appear reckless or threatening—and that the core of its case rested on portraying her as a “liar.”

Speaking outside the Old Bailey on Wednesday, Sarah Cotte told supporters she was seeking to establish “why it is right for the Palestinian people, for occupied people to resist their occupation, to fight back against their oppressors and to reiterate that this is a basic principle of international law.”

Whatever the outcome, the trial itself stands as an indictment of the British state’s use of counter-terrorism legislation to criminalise solidarity with the Palestinian people and to suppress fundamental democratic rights of speech and protest.



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