

Britain: Campus meeting discusses arrest of Rizwaan Sabir and Hicham Yezza

By Robert Stevens
11 June 2008

Hicham Yezza, a University of Nottingham member of staff, faces the threat of deportation to Algeria. On June 2, he was forcibly moved to the Citadel detention centre at Western Heights, near Dover.

Yezza and Nottingham student Rizwaan Sabir were both arrested on May 14 under the Terrorism Act 2000. Sabir is a master's student in politics and was researching his dissertation on "the American approach to Al Qaeda in Iraq." As part of his preparation, he downloaded, from a US government web site, a copy of an Al Qaeda training manual. He e-mailed the document to his friend, Yezza, and asked if he could print it for him. Sometime after this, a university employee contacted the police stating that the manual had been seen on Yezza's computer.

The two were held for six days and then released without charge on May 20. Subsequently, Yezza was rearrested on immigration legislation. He was denied the right to attend a scheduled hearing, and, on May 23, the Home Office issued an order to deport him to Algeria. The planned deportation was cancelled on May 30, due to an application to the High Court that same day, seeking a judicial review of the Home Office's decision.

On June 2, Yezza's solicitor, David Smith of Cartwright King of Nottingham, said,

"Following the issue of our client's Judicial review last Friday, the case is now with the Home Office's legal advisers (the Treasury Solicitor), to whom we have put detailed representations about certain aspects of the case. We very much hope that this will shortly lead to our client's release, if necessary on restrictions, while the case is thoroughly and properly reviewed at the most senior level."

Students and academics in Britain and internationally have stated their opposition both to the arrests of Sabir and Yezza and to the attempt to deport Yezza, despite the University of Nottingham continuing to justify the decision to call the police on to the campus.

Previous arrests at Nottingham

What makes the arrests of Sabir and Yezza even more disturbing is the fact that both have been high-profile political campaigners at the university.

During his time as a student, Yezza served as a member of

the Students' Union Executive Committee and on the University Senate. He was the president of the Arabic Society and the editor of *Voice* magazine, a journal for international students. For the past five years, he has been the editor of *Ceasefire*, the political journal of the Nottingham Student Peace Movement.

On November 29 last year, Sabir was involved in a protest, organised by the Palestinian Society, against the construction of the Israeli West Bank wall. The protest included erecting a mock "wall" outside the campus library that was painted with slogans and images. After the students were approached by University of Nottingham security, the police arrived. According to the Indymedia website, "This resulted in the threat of arrest to a number of students. For 'breach of the peace', 'assaulting a police officer,' 'filming a police officer' (!), obstructing a police officer and obstruction of the highway. One student was arrested to 'apprehend a breach of the peace.'"

Sabir was the student who was arrested for a "breach of the peace." Following his arrest, he said, "A University campus is meant to be a place where an exchange of ideas and beliefs through peaceful means is encouraged. The University's clamping down on this fundamental right highlights the restrictions that peaceful protestors face when undertaking peaceful protests on issues such as Israel, which it seems to me is becoming taboo to even talk about."

Students at the university mounted a further protest on February 19 to demand "Freedom of Speech" and to oppose the November arrest of Sabir. Among the demands of the demonstration were:

- * The right to free speech on campus and the official recognition of students' right to engage in protest, demonstration or campaign on university property.

- * The right to engage in a peaceful protest without the fear or threat of having police called on campus to break up non-violent demonstrations.

- * The right not to fear intimidation or arrest by university authorities, university security or the police when engaging in a peaceful demonstration.

* The right not to be fined for or prohibited from having or distributing a petition or having or holding a peaceful demonstration.

* The right to engage in the aforementioned activities without having to request prior permission.

Sabir spoke at the demonstration.

These events were the immediate background leading up to the arrests of Yezza and Sabir on May 14, when the university authorities called in the police once again.

These events have rightly caused widespread concerns amongst students and staff members at the university. On June 5, dozens attended a roundtable discussion called by the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (Politics) and the Centre for Research on Identities, Citizenship and Migration (Sociology & Social Policy). The remit of the meeting was to “foster debate among staff and students on the important questions arising from the Nottingham arrests under the antiterrorism legislation. It seeks to discuss critically but constructively the Nottingham arrests and their ramifications for academic life and community relations.”

The main speakers were Vanessa Pupavac, a lecturer in international relations, and Sophia Merton, a postgraduate student involved in the campaign to defend Yezza. Julia O’Connell Davidson, professor of sociology at the School of Sociology and Social Policy, chaired the event.

The registrar of the university was invited to attend the meeting as was the university spokesman Jonathan Ray. Both declined. The university stated that it had set up a committee that was looking into the matter but gave no further details.

Merton said there was a real threat that guidelines would be issued by the university detailing what activities students could undertake. She raised the danger that these guidelines may be particularly aimed at political activists and groups on the campus.

There was a general concern both from the platform and from the floor as to the implications of the arrests. One member of the audience said that some students have already said they will be careful now as to what they research. Another said that they feared that peace activists might be brought in for questioning. One member of the audience said it was important to find out what measures are in place at the university for calling the police onto campus. He said in the case of Sabir and Yezza, the police had arrived in about two minutes.

Some of the students and academics at the meeting said that more was at stake than the particular events at the University of Nottingham.

What was the role of the university in the arrests?

A speaker from the International Students for Social Equality spoke in the discussion and said, “What has been discussed today is very important, particularly the discussion on the role of the university. The fact that the university has refused to

speak here today is indicative. It is not able to speak to students and academics about arrests that took place on its own campus.”

“It is necessary to look at the wider political dimensions of this case. Both Rizwaan and Hicham were politically active people on the campus. For several years now, there has been increasing state surveillance, and in the last few years, this has increasingly included university campuses. At Brunel University in London, guidance was drawn up by one of its departments advising the government to increase surveillance of activists on campus.”

He said that it was very important to establish what role the universities are playing in monitoring political activists. “If it is the case that the police arrived in two minutes after being contacted by the university, it is important that questions are asked. Were Rizwaan and Hicham being monitored, and, if so, for how long?”

A member of the audience said he “did not think it was helpful” to bring up the question of “surveillance and conspiracies” in the meeting. In reply, Bettina Renz, the tutor of Rizwaan Sabir, said, “You could not rule out a link to political activism.” She said that when she was interviewed by the police following the arrests, they constantly asked about Sabir’s political activities.

Sophia Merton also addressed these questions in her summing up. Speaking about the arrests, she stated that “it would be naive to see these arrests as not politically motivated.” One had only to look at the amount of time the police spent on asking about the political views of Yezza and Sabir and about politics on the campus.

Professor Pupavac said that the campaign had won a lot of sympathy and that these questions were also close to the hearts of journalists and those who work in the media. Sometimes, journalists had of necessity to undertake research that some may find offensive.

The ISSE urges all our readers to demand the release of Hicham Yezza. Letters of protest can be addressed to the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith below:

E-mail: indpublicenquiries@ind.homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

Fax: 0208 760 3132

The web site set up by the Stop the Deportation of Hicham Yezza campaign can be accessed at the link below:

<http://freehichamyezza.wordpress.com/>

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>