

Open Letter to the 'Crisis SOAS' Collective

Dear Collective,

Excuse me for addressing you in this 'collective' manner: it is because I ignore the composition of your committee.

I have read with interest your Annual Report 2019. There is much in what you say on various issues that I can agree with, or at least sympathise with. However, I found that your depiction of the Regional Study Weeks (RSWs) that SOAS provides to the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) includes wrong assertions and misrepresents the truth of this programme.

I wish that you would have sought to discuss the matter with the SOAS staff members involved, get their point of view and quote it, before launching your denunciation. This could have helped to at least nuance your report.

The following are a few comments on the relevant section of your report entitled:

No decolonisation without demilitarisation: University receives £400,000 from Ministry of Defence for 'cultural specialist' trainings

The comments follow the text's sequence.

1. The report starts with a stunning remark that shows how much exaggerated its kind of indictment is. Distinguishing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA, which some prefer to call Western Asia and North Africa) from Sub-Saharan Africa would be based on 'anti-Black framing'. The report asserts: *'This regional separation itself is a colonial legacy rooted in racism, in particular the severing of Africa which implies that 'North Africa' is more advanced because of its closer proximity to Europe and therefore whiteness. SOAS clearly continues to be integral to upholding this geographically illiterate and fundamentally anti-Black framing.'*

What is a well-known and very sensible geopolitical consideration, stemming from the linguistic, cultural and political proximity of members of the League of Arab States as evidenced most recently, for example, by what was called the Arab Spring, is here accused of separating North Africa from Sub-Saharan Africa because of the former's 'closer proximity to Europe and therefore whiteness'. This is a most absurd accusation that doesn't require further comment in my view.

2. The report makes some remarks about the Sub-Saharan sessions, including race, gender and origin distribution of the teaching staff. Colleagues involved in these sessions will answer

for themselves, if they wish. There is no mention of the MENA session, which is taught by a team based on gender parity, with 3 out of 4 lecturers originating in the region itself. A reader of the report may get the impression that the training sessions are about war games and strategic advices provided to key military decision-makers, whereas (speaking here again for the MENA sessions) they are essentially about the history, politics and socioeconomics of the region, provided by critical scholars to lower-ranking military personnel. Everything that the teaching staff teaches is included in their publicly available writings and can be obtained by attending SOAS classes, as some military personnel do.

3. The report compares in a graph what SOAS got from the MOD for three years of RSWs with the SOAS director's salary and other items of expenditure. This is supposed to show an order of 'SOAS priorities.' The logical flaw is obvious, however, in comparing the *income* from the MOD contract with various *expenses*.

4. The report describes the Defence Cultural Specialist Unit (DCSU) which is the unit that awarded SOAS the contract in an open tender in which other UK universities took part. It says: *'The seeds of the unit are in the British and American invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Mike Martin, an Officer in Helmand Province, was frustrated by the ignorance of the occupying forces and their misinterpretation of the conflict. Martin is said to have pioneered, designed and implemented the role of 'Cultural Advisor' and the 'Human Terrain Mapping Unit', which eventually became the DCSU in 2010. Martin went on to write 'An Intimate War' for his PhD at KCL, a critical account of the UK's approach in Afghanistan that the MoD tried to block from being published.'*

I am grateful for this story, which I didn't know. It is rather interesting that the inspirer of this unit's creation is someone highly critical of the wars in [Iraq and Afghanistan](#).

5. The report concludes that *'SOAS must cut all of its ties with the MOD and refuse its historic role as enabling the coercive administration and imposition of neo-colonial capitalist empire across the Global South.'* There is a logical/analytical flaw here: is 'the coercive administration and imposition of neo-colonial capitalist empire across the Global South' limited to the MOD? Can't one argue that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is as much a tool of British imperialism? Can't one argue the same about the Department for International Development (DFID)? Beyond that, should SOAS also 'cut all of its ties' with all institutions of the British 'neo-colonial' state, and refuse any form of state funding, replacing this with a massive increase of tuition fees for African and Asian students and a plea for raising the cap on UK/EU tuition fees? Taken to its logical end, the absolutist logic of such argumentation would lead students to refuse to be educated in public academic

institutions, which are arguably cogs in the capitalist/imperialist state system fulfilling an ideological function on behalf of the system.

6. But here is the point indeed: thanks to historical gains in political liberalism resulting in what is called ‘academic freedom’, the academic sphere is a critical one where students are not solely exposed to discourses on behalf of the system as they are in dictatorial states, but where they also encounter criticism of the system. This fact, as also showed by Mike Martin’s story and that of so many whistle-blowers and members of the state apparatus turned critiques of it, validates the comment made by a SOAS spokesperson to the [Morning Star](#), which published a piece on the SOAS Crisis report: *‘A Soas spokesperson told the Star: “We reject any suggestion that we are ‘militarising’ higher education or perpetuating a colonial approach between the UK and other nations. “We take a critical non-Eurocentric stance in relation to our regions, which challenges preconceived notions about politics, culture and society. It is right and important that such perspectives are brought to bear on bodies which are engaged with these regions.’*

It is indeed ‘right and important’ that critical perspectives are brought to bear on such bodies. This is constantly denounced by the hard right. In this regard, it is striking how much the title of the *Morning Star* piece – *Left-wing university took hundreds of thousands of pounds from British military for ‘cultural advice’* – could have been displayed *without changing a single word* by a far-right publication denouncing the MOD for accommodating a critical institution. Should we prefer that the military and security personnel of this country be solely exposed to right-wing education? Is it in the interest of the left in this country, starting with the Labour Party who very rightly denounced recently a bunch of military right-wingers who were using Jeremy Corbin’s portraits as targets for shooting training?

7. The *Morning Star* singles me namely out of all staff involved: *‘Soas staff involved in the scheme include Professor Gilbert Achcar, who has co-authored a book with Noam Chomsky.’* Although it is meant to add to the sensationalism of the article’s title, the reference to my connection with Noam Chomsky is actually warranted. He is indeed the one who convinced me that it is important to let critical voices be heard even among the military. That was when I asked him about the [lecture](#) he gave in 2006 to the United States Military Academy (West Point). I took heed of his advice when I accepted to replace Charles Tripp when he went on retirement.

Best wishes,
Gilbert Achcar