

Israel-Hamas war

Edinburgh student hunger strikers demand university divests over

Gaza ‘complicity’



Protesters and staff call for divestment from holdings in Alphabet and Amazon

Simeon Kerr in Edinburgh YESTERDAY

The University of Edinburgh is under pressure from hunger-striking students to divest from Alphabet and Amazon as a growing number of pro-Palestinian protesters urge their institutions to end “complicity” in the Israeli offensive on Gaza.

A group of 35 students have pitched some 20 tents in Edinburgh’s Old College Quad, and around a dozen of them launched a hunger strike more than two weeks ago. The divestment campaign has won the support of 600 staff and was endorsed with a 97 per cent vote at the students’ union.

“When I realised my tuition money was blood money, I couldn’t focus on university — I’ve been working on the divestment campaign endlessly,” said one of the hunger strikers, who goes by the name “Fig and Olive”.

A Palestinian student in her final year as an undergraduate who has lost relatives in Gaza completed some final examinations in one of the tents, while some of the hunger strikers are resting at home, taking electrolytes and water.

Demonstrations, sit-ins and encampments have been growing across UK universities since the [Israeli offensive in Gaza](#) in response to Hamas’s October 7 attack last year. The protests have been peaceful and generally tolerated by university authorities, in contrast to the [violence and confrontation seen on US campuses](#).



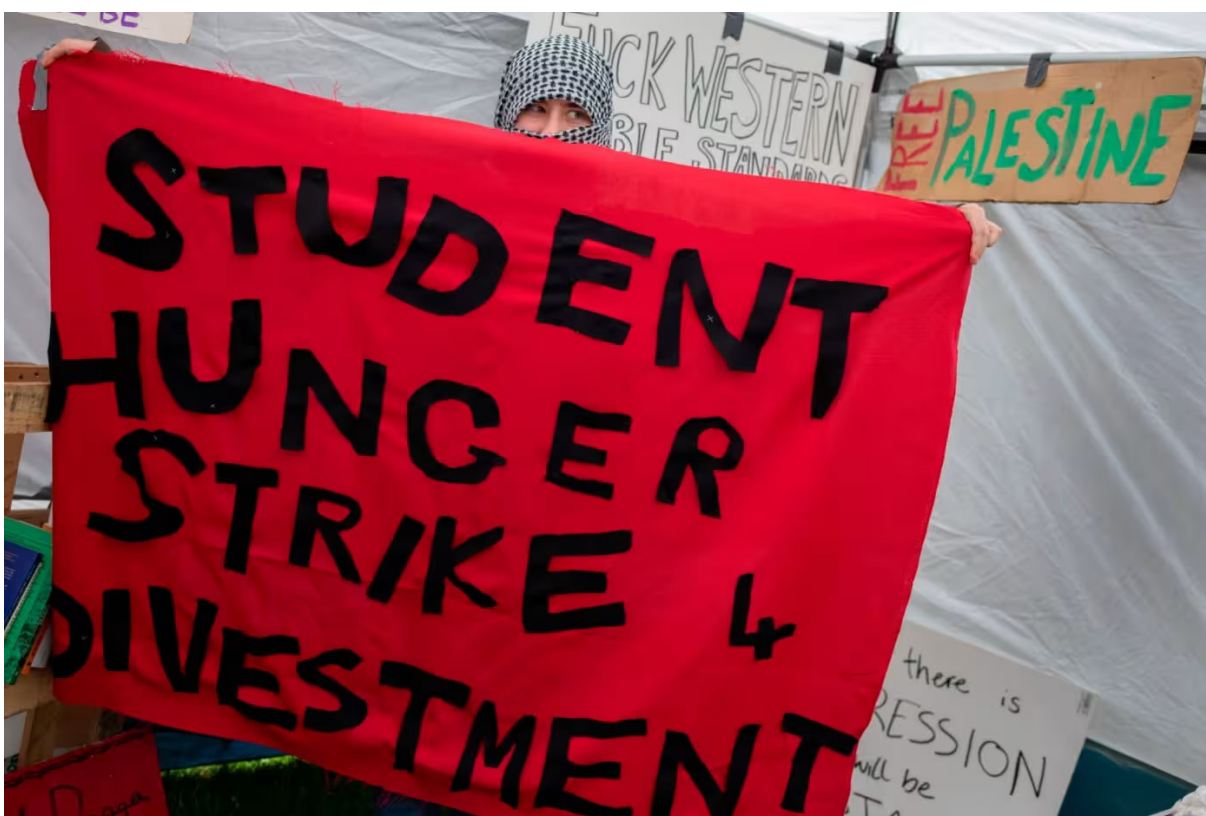


Student activists, who did not wish to be identified, at Edinburgh university, where Lord Balfour was once chancellor © Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert/FT

Some Jewish students in Edinburgh have said they feel intimidated by anti-Israel protests, concerns echoed by senior administration officials. But Jewish protesters say they make up a fifth of the group at the Old College camp. The pro-Palestinian students say the university has ignored their concerns about the university's alleged complicity in Israel's offensive.

The staff and student demands have included that Edinburgh university must sell £2.8mn of direct investments it holds in Google parent Alphabet and £4.9mn held in Amazon for their alleged roles in providing cloud services to the Israeli government and military through the controversial Project Nimbus.

The protesters say the technology provided to the Israeli military is equivalent to weaponry as it enables the offensive in Gaza and occupation of the West Bank. Google says the project is not directed at "military workloads relevant to weapons or intelligence services". Amazon declined to comment.



Students are demanding that Edinburgh university sells £2.8mn of direct investments in Google parent Alphabet and £4.9mn held in Amazon © Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert/FT

The activists have also called for Edinburgh to stop using BlackRock as a manager for £50.2mn of the university's portfolio, claiming that around £783,000 is invested in companies "complicit in genocide". The university's endowment and investment fund

companies complicit in genocide . The university's endowment and investment fund has about £709mn in direct and indirect assets.

“The university has in the past argued that these are indirect holdings, so there is no culpability, but BlackRock as a firm is invested in and is profiting from large weapons’ manufacturers providing technology and components to Israel,” said Samer Abdelnour, a Palestinian senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh Business School, who is one of the staff members pressing for divestment. BlackRock referred questions to the university.

Edinburgh university’s executive decision-making body met this week to discuss the divestment proposals amid growing concerns about student wellbeing.

Nicola Perugini, a professor of international relations involved in the campaign, said the students’ hunger strike had been a crucial factor in the administration’s concerns. “There is concern about student wellbeing and an encampment in the midst of the university — and rightly so,” he said.

In a statement, Edinburgh university said the loss of life in Palestine is “deeply distressing and we understand the strength of feeling on this issue”, and that it will launch a consultation on its responsible investment policy later this month.

“We have reaffirmed our commitment to divesting from armaments and have commissioned a small working group to consider the scope of that commitment,” it added.

Staff and students have requested a follow-up meeting to clarify what they say was the university’s “ambiguous” response to their demands.

Foreign Office,

November 2nd, 1917.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations

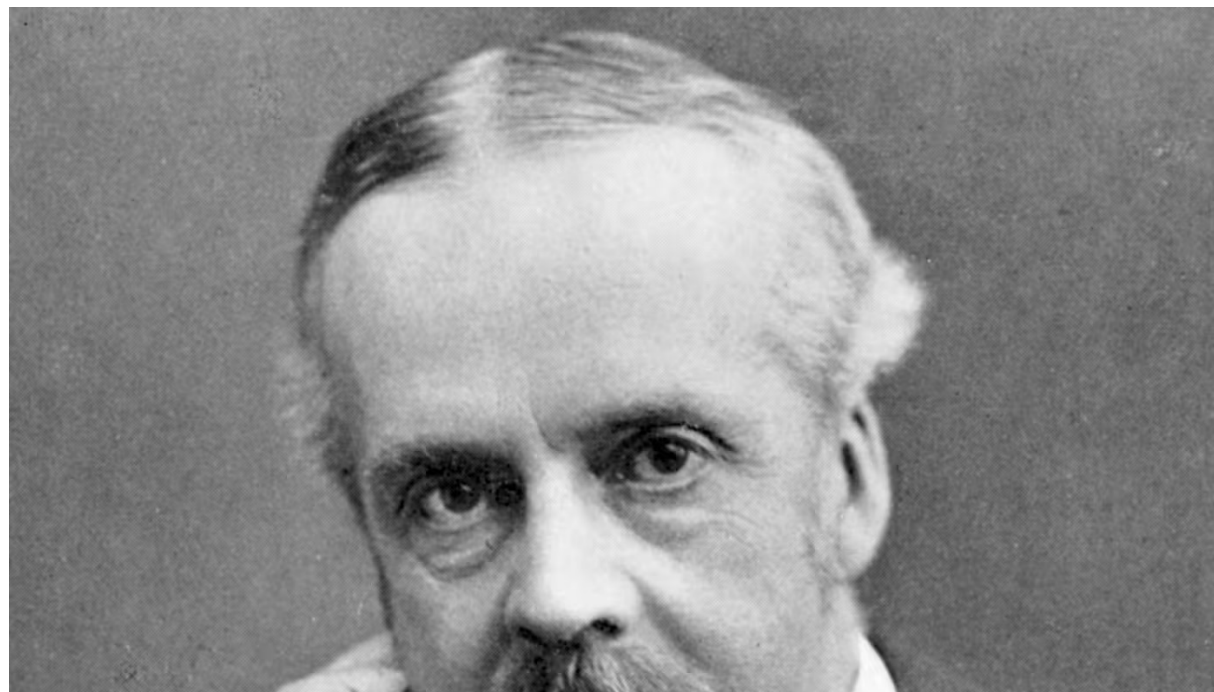
which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet

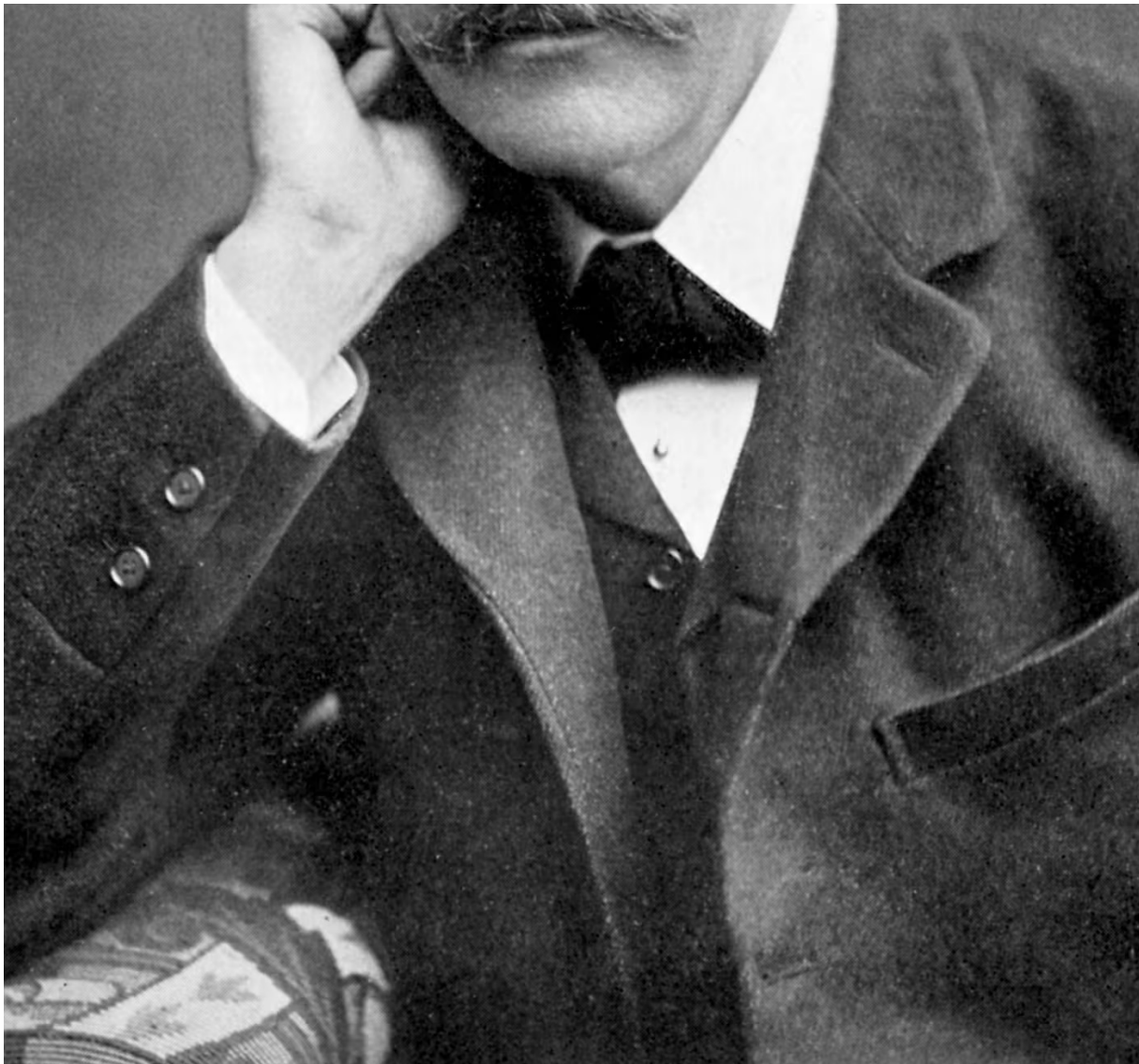
'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country'.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours
Arthur James Balfour

The Balfour declaration © UIG via Getty Images





Lord Balfour © Lebrecht/Alamy

Lord Arthur Balfour was chancellor of Edinburgh university when, as foreign secretary, he gave his name to the 1917 Balfour declaration backing the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, a historic grievance that fuelled the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The institution's management has told students that a painting of the Conservative politician has been removed from Old College. In March, activists damaged a similar portrait at Cambridge university.

The divestment push has spread across the UK and Ireland, where multiple pro-Palestinian encampments have been piling pressure on university managers to introduce reforms to their ethics policies, echoing previous campaigns highlighting historical links to slavery and colonialism.

In late April, York university [said](#) it no longer held investments in companies that primarily make weapons and defence related products.

Last week, an encampment at Trinity College Dublin ended when management said it would divest from Israeli companies with activities in the occupied Palestinian territories and that appear on a UN blacklist of businesses with ties to illegal Israeli settlements.

In Edinburgh, staff on Wednesday gathered to express their support for the students at the Old College encampment, which was last occupied by students in the 1980s protesting against collaboration with apartheid South Africa.

“The strike continues until the university is no longer complicit in genocide,” said one protester, her face masked by a Palestinian headscarf, or keffiyeh.

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