

United Kingdom: The “Filton 18” case is a warning sign of democracy and rule of law decline

Concerns by the legal and human rights community about warning signs of erosion of the rule of law and democracy in the United Kingdom

The national and international legal and human rights community is alarmed by credible reports of serious violations of fair trial rights and other human rights of Palestine Action activists in the ongoing “Filton 18” case. The case reflects a broader pattern of increasing restriction and repression of collective dissent in the United Kingdom, including in relation to the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

“Direct action” against Israeli weapons manufacturing hub

The case concerns the breaking into an Israeli weapons manufacturing hub (linked to Elbit Systems, a military technology company) in Bristol by members of Palestine Action, a grassroots movement that organises direct actions against Israeli weapons factories in the United Kingdom, on 6 August 2024.¹ The activists breached two security fences through the use of a de-commissioned prison van, entered the building and damaged equipment and property, including quadcopters (known as “killer drones”),² in order to disrupt the operations of the company.³ The action allegedly caused 1 million pounds worth of damage.⁴

The police arrived on site within 15 minutes of the intrusion and arrested 6 activists.⁵ Between 8 and 12 August 2024, 4 more activists were arrested under terrorism legislation for their alleged connection to a demonstration at the weapons manufacturing hub in Bristol on 6 August 2024.⁶ In November 2024, 8 more activists were arrested and charged in connection with the events, taking the total to 18.⁷

Misuse of anti-terrorism legislation and UN experts’ intervention

After being under arrest for an initial 36 hours, the activists’ detention was extended by 7 days using section 5 of the Terrorism Act 2006 (preparing or assisting a terrorist act) and

¹ Communication of 21 November 2024 by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ref. [AL GBR 13/2024](#). See also Palestine Action’s website: <https://www.palestineaction.org/>.

² <https://www.thecanary.co/trending/2024/08/06/palestine-action-prison-van-bristol/>

³ UN experts’ [communication](#) of 21 November 2024 (cited earlier), p. 1. See also: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/palestine-action-israel-filton-six-court-charged-terrorism-b1176206.html>.

⁴ See <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/palestine-action-israel-filton-six-court-charged-terrorism-b1176206.html>

⁵ UN experts’ [communication](#) of 21 November 2024 (cited earlier), p. 1.

⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clvgv1p3867o>

counter-terrorism police powers in the Terrorism Act 2000.⁸ The activists were not charged under terrorism legislation, but for multiple offences including “criminal damage”, “aggravated burglary”, and “violent disorder”. However, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) stated in a press release that it would submit to the court that the offences have a “terrorist connection”.⁹ If the court determines that an offence was committed with a terrorism connection, this constitutes an aggravating factor for sentencing.

The activists have been denied bail and are being subjected to higher security protocols due to their arrest under counter-terrorism legislation and the subsequent submission that the offences have a “terrorist connection”.¹⁰ The criminal proceedings are ongoing, with the first trial currently scheduled for November 2025.¹¹

In a joint letter to the UK authorities dated 21 November 2024, several United Nations experts expressed serious concern about the circumstances of the activists’ detention, investigation and prosecution, including periods of incommunicado detention that “*may [have] amount[ed] to enforced disappearance*”.¹²

The four UN experts observed that the police “*exercised significant powers under counter-terrorism legislation despite the **absence of a credible connection between the activists’ conduct to terrorism as properly defined***” and criticised the seemingly unjustified use of counter-terrorism laws against protest activity by political activists, “*notwithstanding that it involved some alleged violence that should be prosecuted as ordinary criminal offences*”.¹³ Most worryingly, the letter states that anti-terrorism legislation “*may have been used to circumvent procedural safeguards in relation to detention, and as a specific and general deterrent*”¹⁴ – **suggesting there may have been an illegitimate ulterior purpose for their detention, which would amount to a serious breach of human rights standards signalling backsliding of the rule of law.**¹⁵

The criminal proceedings against the Filton 18 are a visible instance in which the overly broad definition of terrorism in UK legislation enables counter-terrorism powers to be used against violent political protest that is not genuinely terrorist in nature.¹⁶ This has a chilling

⁸ UN experts’ [communication](#) of 21 November 2024 (cited above), p. 2.

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<https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/group-charged-over-violent-disorder-and-aggravated-burglary-business-premises>

¹⁰ UN experts’ [communication](#) of 21 November 2024 (cited earlier), p. 6.

¹¹ See [response](#) of 24 January 2025 (Note verbale no. 021) of the UK mission to the UN in Geneva to the UN communication of 21 November 2024.

¹² UN experts’ [communication](#) of 21 November 2024 (cited earlier), p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3 and p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ See European Court of Human Rights, [Kavala v. Turkey](#) (Application no. 28749/18, 10 December 2019), paragraphs 215-232; [Selahattin Demirtaş \(no. 2\) v Turkey \[GC\]](#) (Application no. 14305/17, 22 December 2020), paragraph 421-438. See also Floris Tan, ‘The Dawn of Article 18 ECHR: A Safeguard Against European Rule of Law Backsliding?’, *Goettingen Journal of International Law* 9 (2018) 1, Special Ed. Holterhus, 109-141.

¹⁶ UN experts’ [communication](#) of 21 November 2024 (cited earlier), p. 1 and p.4. See also Amnesty International’s statement of 1 May 2025 on X: <https://x.com/AmnestyUK/status/1917961260429160765>

effect on political protests, freedom of expression and opinion, the right to participate in public life, and political and public discourse.¹⁷ Under the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA) and as a party to international human rights treaties including the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the UK has a legal duty to uphold these rights and ensure an enabling environment for their exercise.

Interference with counterterrorism police and prosecuting authorities

Judicial independence and impartiality is a fundamental aspect of the right to a fair trial and the protection of human rights, and a prerequisite to the rule of law.¹⁸ This includes prosecutorial independence.¹⁹ Judicial and prosecutorial authorities must be free from political interference by the government²⁰ and from undue external and internal pressure and influence.²¹ They must also present the appearance of independence and impartiality.²²

Documents obtained on 29 April 2025 through a Freedom of Information request have revealed that the UK government has shared contact details of counter-terrorism police and prosecuting authorities with the Israeli embassy in September 2024, during the investigation into the Filton 18 action and shortly after the Attorney General's Office met with the Israeli ambassador to the UK.²³ The documents disclosed were almost entirely redacted. However, documents disclosed in August 2023 evidence that the Israeli authorities have previously attempted to pressure the UK government to intervene in judicial proceedings relating to UK protests.²⁴

These communications, and the lack of transparency concerning their contents and whether these relate to the proceedings against Palestine Action members, raise serious questions

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁸ ECtHR, *Guðmundur Andri Ástráðsson* [GC], App no. 26374/18, 1 December 2020, para. 239; and *Grzęda v Poland* [GC], 43572/18, 15 March 2022, para. 298.

¹⁹ See European Court of Human Rights, *Kövesi v. Romania*, App no. 3594/19, 5 May 2020; Consultative Council of European Prosecutors (CCPE), Opinion No. 16 (2021): Implications of the decisions of international courts and treaty bodies as regards the practical independence of prosecutors; UNODC, *The Status and Role of Prosecutors* (2014), p.11; Preamble to Recommendation Rec(2000)19 of the Committee of Ministers on the Role of Public Prosecution in the Criminal Justice System.

²⁰ Human Rights Committee, General Comment no. 32, Article 14: Right to equality before courts and tribunals and to a fair trial, UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/32, 23 August 2007, para. 19. See also checklists for judicial independence provided in Venice Commission, Rule of Law Checklist, March 2016, CDL-AD(2016)007, p. 20, 22.

²¹ Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct, adopted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Res. 2006/23, July 2006, Principle 1; Venice Commission, Rule of Law Checklist, March 2016, CDL-AD(2016)007, p. 20.

²² See e.g. European Court of Human Rights, *Campbell and Fell v. the United Kingdom*, ECtHR, Apps nos. 7819/77 and 7878/77, 28 June 2014, para. 78.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/apr/29/police-and-prosecutors-details-shared-with-israel-during-uk-protests-inquiry-papers-suggest>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/aug/20/israeli-embassy-officials-attempted-to-influence-uk-court-cases-documents-suggest>

around the independence and impartiality of prosecuting authorities in the Filton 18 case. These concerns are strengthened by the UN experts' opinion that the use of anti-terrorism laws against the Filton 18 lacked a credible basis and may have pursued an ulterior purpose.

The UK's continuing link to gross human rights violations in Palestine

There is a clear connection between misuse of anti-terrorism legislation and alleged Israeli interference in the Filton 18 case, and seemingly unlawful ties between the UK and Israel.

On 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that there was a plausible claim of a genocide being committed by Israel in Gaza. Israel failed to comply with the ICJ's provisional measures orders and continued to violate international humanitarian law, including through indiscriminate bombings.²⁵

Since then, human rights experts and NGOs have widely confirmed that Israel's actions amount to an ongoing genocide.²⁶ In November 2024, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against the Israeli Prime Minister and former Defense Minister for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza.

In addition, the International Court of Justice has now ruled that Israel's occupation of Palestine is unlawful and its laws and policies against Palestinians breach the prohibition on apartheid. The ICJ's advisory opinion set out clear obligations for third states to distinguish between Israel and the OPT in their dealings with Israel, to not support Israel's unlawful acts and the unlawful situation it has created in the OPT, and to ensure Israel's compliance with IHL.²⁷

Despite these legal developments, Israel has continued to implement genocidal policies and to violate international human rights law and international human rights law with impunity in Gaza and the West Bank.²⁸ Israel's security minister has most recently revealed Israel's plans for Gaza to be "completely destroyed".²⁹

²⁵ See

<https://www.icj.org/gaza-one-month-on-israel-fails-to-comply-with-the-order-of-the-international-court-of-justice/>

²⁶ "Anatomy of a Genocide", Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese (A/HRC/55/73); Amnesty International, 'Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territory: "You Feel Like You Are Subhuman": Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza', Report of 5 December 2024; Human Rights Watch, "[Extermination and Acts of Genocide: Israel Deliberately Depriving Palestinians in Gaza of Water](#)", Report of 19 December 2024.

²⁷ See

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/24/human-rights-watch-written-evidence-uk-foreign-affairs-committee-inquiry-israeli>

²⁸ See for example <https://amnesty.ca/human-rights-news/israel-opt-two-month-siege-genocide-gaza/> ; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/tragedy-foretold-and-stain-our-collective-humanity-special-rapporteur-warns>

²⁹

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-gaza-war-hamas-netanyahu-expansion-reservoirs-b2745865.html>

Evidence suggests active and sustained cooperation between the UK and Israeli armies.³⁰ Concerns surround reports that the UK military has carried out over 500 surveillance flights around Gaza since December 2023, sharing intelligence with Israel³¹ – including during the ceasefire.³² In addition, while a partial arm embargo was announced in September 2024, this did not include UK-made components for the F-35 fighter jet programme going indirectly to Israel.³³ In the two months following the embargo announcement, documents suggest approval of 34 military export licences to Israel.³⁴ UK-made quadcopter components are also allegedly being supplied to Israel.³⁵ Credible reports show that officials from the Home Office, headed by Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, met with Elbit Systems representatives in December 2024.³⁶ Unofficial meetings have also been held in the UK between high-ranking UK and Israeli government and army officials, with the UK government alleging that the Israeli officials have immunity from prosecution for war crimes.³⁷

These policies and practices under the current UK government not only suggest that the UK is failing to prevent genocide,³⁸ but also raise serious questions about the UK's own role in Israel's genocidal acts and the gross human rights violations resulting from its unlawful occupation of Palestine.

The context of continued political and military alliance between the UK and Israel in seeming breach of international law lends weight to concerns that the proceedings against the Filton 18, whose actions targeted quadcopter production and exports from the UK to Israel, are not being carried out in good faith and in an independent and impartial manner.

Political activism and human rights demands must not be treated as terrorism

The background of the Filton 18 case is a broader and increasing misuse of anti-terrorism law and rhetoric against protest rights and freedom of expression in relation to demands for

³⁰ <https://www.declassifieduk.org/birds-of-a-feather-the-royal-and-israeli-air-forces/> ; <https://www.declassifieduk.org/israeli-general-on-secret-trip-to-london-questioned-over-war-crimes/>

³¹ <https://www.declassifieduk.org/britain-sent-over-500-spy-flights-to-gaza/> ; <https://www.declassifieduk.org/raf-spy-flights-over-gaza-risk-complicity-in-israeli-torture/>

³² <https://www.declassifieduk.org/why-is-britain-still-sending-spy-flights-towards-gaza/>

³³

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/24/human-rights-watch-written-evidence-uk-foreign-affairs-committee-inquiry-israeli> ;

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/18/over-230-global-organizations-demand-governments-producing-f-35-jets-stop-arming>

³⁴ <https://www.declassifieduk.org/labour-allowed-dozens-of-arms-exports-to-israel-after-weapons-sanctions/> ; see also <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-continuing-send-arms-israel-despite-ban-report>

³⁵ <https://www.declassifieduk.org/israels-killer-drones-powered-with-uk-engines/>

³⁶ <https://www.declassifieduk.org/labour-held-secret-meeting-with-top-israeli-arms-firm/>

³⁷ <https://www.glanlaw.org/single-post/uk-shield-israeli-foreign-minister-from-arrest-during-london-vi> ; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israeli-army-chief-met-uk-attorney-general-secret-trip-after-icc-warrants-issued>

³⁸ As required under Article 1 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948. See

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/24/human-rights-watch-written-evidence-uk-foreign-affairs-committee-inquiry-israeli> .

human rights and international law to be upheld regarding Palestine, as well as in relation to climate change.³⁹

This includes, for instance, increasing use of anti-terrorism powers against journalists reporting on Palestine;⁴⁰ undue restrictions on public events and discussion under the problematic “Prevent” duty under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015;⁴¹ injunctions against Palestine-related protests on university campuses;⁴² and undue treatment or labelling of Palestine and environmental protestors as terrorists.⁴³

While human rights organisations and institutions have previously denounced the overly broad nature of anti-terrorism legislation and the use of disproportionate counter-terrorism power, the UK has rejected reforms.⁴⁴

These restrictions sit alongside the broader criminalisation and stigmatisation of peaceful protest and advocacy.⁴⁵ On 2 May 2025, the Court of Appeal ruled that regulations adopted in 2023 restricting peaceful protest were made unlawfully, and it is due to decide whether these should be quashed.⁴⁶

As highlighted by the UN experts’ letter concerning the Filton 18 case, “[a]ny measure taken against acts of political activism must respect the **requirements of legality, necessity and**

³⁹ Communication [AL GBR 15/2024](#) of 4 December 2024 by the UN Special Rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and on the right to privacy. See also <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-climate-and-pro-palestine-protesters-report-unprecedented-crackdown>

⁴⁰ See <https://www.declassifieduk.org/journalism-is-not-a-crime-tell-that-to-the-british-state/>

⁴¹ Amnesty International, “[‘This is the Thought Police’: the Prevent duty and its chilling effect on human rights](#)”, November 2023.

⁴² See

<https://www.ucu.cam.ac.uk/joint-press-statement-campaigners-and-union-slam-anti-protest-injunction-granted-to-university-of-cambridge/>

⁴³ UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, Michel Forst, “[State repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience: a major threat to human rights and democracy](#)”, February 2024, pp. 8-9; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-stands-firm-on-tackling-guerrilla-protest-tactics> ; Amnesty International, “[Europe: Under Protected and Over Restricted: The state of the right to protest in 21 European countries](#)”, 8 July 2024, p. 99.

⁴⁴ See Amnesty International, [United Kingdom: Submission on counter-terrorism law, policy and practice in the United Kingdom for the Independent Commission on Counter-Terrorism Law, Policy and Practice](#) (10 January 2023), p. 21.

⁴⁵ Amnesty International, “[Europe: Under Protected and Over Restricted: The state of the right to protest in 21 European countries](#)”, 8 July 2024; <https://elsc.support/resource/suppressing-palestinian-rights-advocacy/> ; Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders under the Aarhus Convention, [End of mission statement: Visit to London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 10-12 January 2024](#) ; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/16/uk-new-government-failing-uphold-democratic-freedoms>

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<https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/liberty-defeats-government-appeal-as-court-rules-anti-protest-laws-are-unlawful/>

proportionality to avoid chilling legitimate dissent and expression”.⁴⁷ Protest involving property damage, where they do not cause death or serious injury, should not be prosecuted and punished under anti-terrorism legislation but as ordinary or public offences.⁴⁸ To ensure respect for human rights, the UK’s anti-terrorism legislation and its application should reflect a less broad definition of terrorism as “*criminal acts intended to cause death, serious personal injury or hostage taking, in order to intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, and where constituting an offence under international counterterrorism instruments or a serious crime under national law*”.⁴⁹

CALL TO ACTION

The Filton 18 case is a litmus test for democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights in the United Kingdom.

Political interference with the judiciary and misuse of anti-terrorism legislation for political purposes are unacceptable in a democratic society founded on the rule of law.

We call on **UK authorities** to:

- Urgently cease the misuse of anti-terrorism legislation against the Filton 18, in line with international human rights law.
- Provide concrete guarantees of a fair trial by an independent and impartial tribunal, including by disclosing any attempt by Israeli authorities to influence the conduct of the proceedings against the Filton 18.
- Provide information on measures taken to safeguard the activists’ procedural rights in detention.
- Reform the UK’s overly broad terrorism legislation in line with recommendations by human rights institutions and organisations, including by excluding acts of advocacy, dissent, protest, or industrial action where they are not intended to cause death or serious injury with a terrorist purpose.

We urge the **UN Special Procedures and other international human rights bodies** to:

- Express concern about apparent breaches of due process and human rights law in the Filton 18 case.

⁴⁷ UN experts’ [communication](#) of 21 November 2024 (cited earlier), p. 5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁹ Ibid; Security Council resolution 1566 (2004); model definition of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, A/HRC/16/51, para. 28.

- Monitor and report on the case as part of broader efforts to combat the erosion of democracy and the rule of law in Europe.
- Monitor other instances of misuse of anti-terrorism law against activists advocating for Palestinian human rights or for safeguarding of the environment.

Signatories *(in alphabetical order):*

- **Arab Lawyers Association (UK)**
- **Asociación Americana de Juristas**
- **Associação Portuguesa de Juristas Democratas**
- **Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de España, APDHE (Spain)**
- **il Centro di ricerca ed elaborazione per la democrazia (CRED)**
- **Cyprus Democratic Lawyers Association (CDLA)**
- **European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights (ELDH)**
- **European Legal Support Center (ELSC)**
- **Evelyn Dürmayer IADL permanent representative at the UN (Vienna)**
- **Foundation Day of the Endangered Lawyer**
- **Indian Association of Lawyers**
- **International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL)**
- **International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP)**
- **The International Commission to Support Palestinian Rights (ICSPR)**
- **Italian Democratic Jurists**
- **Law for Palestine**
- **National Association of Democratic Lawyers, South Africa**
- **National Lawyers Guild International (USA)**
- **Progressive Lawyers' Association, (ÇHD), Turkey**
- **Socialist Lawyers Association of Ireland**
- **Worldwide Lawyers Association (WOLAS)**