

EASY TARGETS

Immigration Lawyers in Britain
Threatened by Far-Right
Extremist Violence



Introduction

Immigration lawyers in Britain told Human Rights First they need better protection from the United Kingdom government after they were targeted by far-right groups during widespread rioting in July and August 2024.

Major violence broke out across British cities in late July after an attack on children in a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in the northern city of Southport, near Liverpool. Three children, aged six, seven, and nine, were stabbed to death in the attack and ten more people were wounded.

Within hours of the attack, posts on social media falsely claimed the attacker was an Arab Muslim who had illegally entered Britain and applied for asylum.

The man charged with the attack is Axel Rudakubana, a British citizen born in Wales. He was 17 at the time of the attack but turned 18 shortly afterward. The judge lifted the usual anonymity granted to minors partly to address the fake reports fueling violence.

Far-right rioters chanted **"We want our country back,"** and attacked mosques, hotels housing asylum seekers, and the police. To date, more than 1,000 people have been arrested in connection with the riots ([including a small number](#) who fought back against the rioters), and around 500 charged, including at least 70 under the age of 18. Courts have so far convicted over 120 people, including [at least one former British soldier](#), with sentences ranging up to six years in jail.

Extremists circulated on social media the names and addresses of 39 targets, including immigration lawyers, those offering legal services to migrants, and refugee shelters. A far-right channel on Telegram which started at the time of the riots amassed 15,000 members within days and promoted the list. Police advised immigration lawyers to take security precautions, including working from home, boarding office windows, and installing fireproof letterboxes. Some of the addresses listed were lawyers' homes.

"We took the threats very seriously," Liz Barratt, Partner and head of the immigration team at Bindmans LLP told Human Rights First. Bindmans is a prominent London firm of lawyers, known for 50 years for its human rights work. **"As a firm we tightened our security in the building, such as re-engaging all the internal door locks, advising staff to leave the building earlier than peak times, using the back entrances, and not meeting new clients out of the office or even in the office on their own."**

Immigration lawyers say the attacks followed years of vilification of their work by prominent politicians and sections of the British media. The riots broke out a few weeks after a British general election, in which a Labour Party victory ended 14 years of Conservative Party government.

“The legal community has repeatedly warned that the vilification of lawyers would endanger their safety and undermine the justice system,” Zoe Bantleman, Legal Director of the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA) told Human Rights First. **“Over the past month, we have seen offices having to close and lawyers contact the police and take precautionary measures to safeguard themselves, for fear of being harmed for carrying out their professional duties. Such measures have had serious implications for the ability of individuals, including the most vulnerable in our community, to access justice.”**

Immigration lawyer Harjap Singh Bhangal has offices in London and Birmingham and told Human Rights First that when the threats against immigration lawyers began to circulate in August, his name was on the list, and that police visited his offices in London and Birmingham telling staff to evacuate. He estimates that around 60 legal firms had to temporarily shut down. **“We had to close down for a while - it was the school holidays and people would be in the reception area with their kids. We’re easy targets, it was too dangerous,”** he said.

The UK lawyers asked for more protection from the British government and support from counterparts in the United States and elsewhere to counter what they describe as the transitional threat of far-right extremism. These efforts should include steps to protect lawyers' safety, reject and counter anti-immigrant rhetoric, respect the right to seek asylum, and ensure prompt investigation of attacks as well as prosecutions.



Human Rights First and human rights lawyers

Since it was founded in 1978 as the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, Human Rights First has advocated for the protection of human rights lawyers and other human rights defenders (HRDs) across the world.

Human Rights First is guided by the principles outlined in the [1990 UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers](#), whose Article 16 states "Governments shall ensure that lawyers (a) are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; Article 17 says "Where the security of lawyers is threatened as a result of discharging their functions, they shall be adequately safeguarded by the authorities." Human Rights First is also guided by the [1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), which states (Article 11) that "Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to the lawful exercise of his or her occupation or profession."

Around the world, lawyers are targeted and attacked for working to protect the rights of others. They are targeted by authoritarian politicians, influential media figures, and by others, in democracies and repressive regimes.

Over the last decade or so, Human Rights First has visited human rights lawyers in various countries to better understand firsthand their challenges and so better respond to their requests for support. These countries include [Bahrain](#), [Egypt](#), [Hong Kong](#), [Indonesia](#), [Kenya](#), [Ukraine](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#), and [Northern Ireland](#).

While Human Rights First has for decades been working on issues around past and current [threats to human rights lawyers](#) in Northern Ireland in relation to the 1969-1998 conflict, this report focuses on the recent targeting of immigration lawyers in Britain.

Widespread extremist violence

Within hours of the Southport attacks, violence began to break out in the city and spread across the country in the following days and weeks. Apart from one demonstration in Belfast, the unrest happened mostly in northern British cities, including Blackpool, Hull, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, Bolton, Liverpool, Rotherham, Tamworth, Southport and Sunderland.

Rioters [chanted](#) "Stop the Boats," echoing one of the Conservative party's slogans during the July 2024 general election, referring to people crossing in small boats from France into England.

Social media posts included [claims](#) of "innocent English people being hunted down" and anti-Muslim attacks such as "our women are not halal meat." Prominent British far-right figure Laurence Fox tweeted "it's war" and "for decades British girls have been raped by immigrant barbarians." U.S. InfoWars founder Alex Jones [shared](#) some of the tweets. In a



widely condemned message, Elon Musk, Owner of X (formerly Twitter), posted during the riots that "Civil war is inevitable."

In one survey in late August, 75 percent of Muslims said they were very worried about their safety, compared with 16 percent before the riots.

Extremism expert Daniel De Simone suggests that "no one organization owned or organized the riots: they were bigger than that." Britain's far right is changing, he says, as exemplified by how the recent riots developed, as some extremists "have moved away from setting up formal groups that draw attention from the police and have instead sought to create looser networks, particularly online, where anyone can follow extremist channels or influencers."

While some prominent extremists were present at the violence, he says, "Most of those who took part in the disorder had no known links to the extreme or far right. There were a range of people involved, from people in their late 60s to children, with a range of different motivations."

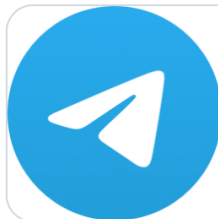
The list of targets on Telegram directly threatened immigration lawyers and others, putting "law firms across the country on high alert," said the British legal press. At least one organization on the list had to temporarily close after threats of far-right violence. One post on Twitter included a link to the list of targets and said: "Wednesday night lads. They won't stop coming until YOU tell them. No more immigration 8PM. Mask up. Spread this as far and wide as you can."



Senior Moment
@SeniorM0ment



Wednesday night lads.
They won't stop coming until YOU tell them.
No more immigration 8PM.
Mask up.
Spread this as far and wide as you can.



t.me
Telegram: Contact @southportwakeup

3:06 AM · Aug 5, 2024 from Preston, England · 878 Views



Immigration lawyers feared violent attack, and one lawyer on the list [told the BBC](#) she had been repeatedly threatened, had to take down her website and cancel all her in-person appointments. **“On Monday I started getting the messages: ‘You’re on a hitlist,’”** she said. **“People have been calling up my office to threaten and insult me. I’m just trying to do my job.”**

Liz Barratt of Bindmans told Human Rights First that the “direct naming, publishing of names, and targeting of individual firms was a shock and a very chilling development. **“What I thought about the list was that it had been put together by someone rapidly and after a Google-type search as there were many prominent practitioners/firms not included, but that did not mean that those on it did not feel individually threatened. I think all of us practicing immigration law, and those who support migrants generally, felt targeted and afraid for our clients, our colleagues, and ourselves,”** she said.

Immigration lawyers fear offices being targeted



GETTY IMAGES

Lawyers said they feared being targeted after a list of immigration centres was circulated on social media

Eleanor Lawrie
BBC News

Immigration lawyers tell BBC they fear violent attacks from far-right extremists in England.



President of the [Law Society of England and Wales](#), Nick Emmerson, [said](#) in August. **"There is a real and specific threat to named firms with their addresses being circulated on social media. It's a very difficult moment, large numbers of firms are affected and it's after quite a few years where immigration lawyers have been attacked for doing their jobs."**

Harjap Singh Bhangal said there was a heavy police presence near his office for some days after the violence broke out, and about 200 local people protested against the targeting of his firm in London and other immigration lawyers. **"The protests were supportive and good but I shouldn't have to depend on other civilians to protect me. After such public targeting the government should have provided me with expert security advice,"** he said.

Liz Barratt described how her firm was forced to respond. **"On 6th August I sent a message to all the team that I did not want them to come to the office if they were worried about traveling and they could all work from home,"** she told Human Rights First. **"On 7th August I asked all the immigration team who were in the office to leave early afternoon as we had reports of violence in London, and we decided that none of us should go to the office on 8th. We have a team Whatsapp group and everyone reported to the group on 7th so we all knew everyone was home. We returned to the office on the 9th."**

They also contacted their clients due to report to government reporting centers at that time **"to advise them to consider carefully if they felt they could report and not to go if their reporting fell between 6th to 9th,"** she said.

The Immigration Law Practitioners' Law Association (ILPA) [called](#) on the British government **"to create conditions in which we are able to perform our professional duties, including by representing and upholding the human rights of migrants and those targeted based on their appearance, without fear for our safety. Where our security is threatened as a result of carrying out our essential and proper function in a democracy, the Government and law enforcement agencies should investigate and monitor threats to our safety.... We call on the Government to stand with us."**

Inflammatory media

Digital misinformation expert Marc Owen Jones [identified](#) the influence of the [@EuropeInvasionn](#) Twitter account on events following the Southport killings. It has continually shared anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant messages, generating a phenomenal 133 million impressions.

British TV news channel ITV News [reported](#) the fringe TV channel Channel3Now as the source of much of the amplifying ([although not creating](#)) the false claims about the attacker being named Ali Al Shakati, and then further false reports that he was a Muslim asylum seeker. Channel3Now presented itself as a U.S.-style TV news show, and although there were claims it was linked to the Russian state, a [BBC investigation found](#) no evidence of such connections, although it did find some ties in the U.S. and Pakistan.



In late August police in Pakistan [arrested](#) a 32-year-old man accused of spreading fake information on social media about the attack. Investigators said he amplified an article on the Channel3Now website and earned money from views generated by posting about crime in Britain, the U.S., and Australia.

Harjap Singh Bhangal has been an immigration lawyer since 2002, and now has offices in London and Birmingham with a staff of around 15 people. He told Human Rights First that for many years he had few problems doing his job, but since around 2014, the time of the Brexit debate, the vilification of migrants and their lawyers has intensified.

He appears regularly on right-wing media, saying that although it often triggers abuse against him, **"you can't change views unless you're in the conversation...even if I change the minds of five people, that's a win for me. You have to call them out on their bullshit."**

He showed Human Rights First an email sent to him in 2023 that said, **"I hope you are shot in the head."** Social media attacks are now "normal," for him, he said: **"not right but normal."** A post on X (formerly Twitter) under his picture said: **"Immigration lawyers have blood on their hands."** Another said, **"Filthy scum lawyers are destroying the country for personal greed! Why can't they be the ones getting constantly stabbed!"**

Mobashra Tazamal of the Georgetown University [Bridge Initiative](#) told Human Rights First that social media is only part of the problem, and that the normalization of Islamophobia has also contributed to the violence.

The British government, she said, needs to **"acknowledge that Islamophobia is a real problem and a treat it as a serious threat,"** and **"really put regulations and fines in place for the media that keep promoting harmful tropes and lies."**

Part of the problem, she [says](#), is that the **"British media has long peddled a manufactured narrative that Muslims don't assimilate or uphold 'British values,'"** fueling prejudices that **"they're prone to violence, that Muslim men are [involved](#) in pedophilia and the rape of white women, and that Muslim women are both oppressed and also a threat to British culture."**

Tazamal warns that **"British media and politicians have sowed the seeds for this violent disorder, having spent years vilifying and scapegoating Muslims to divert attention away from policy failures, and to gain votes and views. The failure to acknowledge and tackle this in newsrooms and the halls of parliament guarantees we will see a repeat of these ugly riots."**

"Though profoundly shocking, the recent threats against immigration lawyers did not occur in isolation but were the natural inheritance of a climate of hostility fueled by divisive, anti-migrant, and populist rhetoric. This inflammatory language has come both from senior politicians in previous Governments and from certain parts of the media, upon which the far-right have latched," Zoe Bantleman, ILPA's Legal Director told Human Rights First.



The Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the Anglican church worldwide, Justin Welby, [denounced](#) the use of Christian iconography by the far-right rioters, and said that Christians should **“not be associated with any far-right group – because those groups are unchristian.”** He also suggested that disinformation had **“flourished in fertile ground cultivated by years of rhetoric from some of our press and politicians”**.

In an August 2024 report on the UK government, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination [urged](#) the British government to **“develop and adopt a media strategy addressing the responsibility of journalists and broadcasters to avoid the use of hate speech and stereotypes in describing minority communities, and closely and effectively scrutinize newspapers and broadcasters with respect to content that incites racial discrimination and hatred or strengthens xenophobic attitudes.”**

Far-right political rhetoric against lawyers

The violence followed a long history of senior British Conservative Party politicians, including Prime Ministers, using dangerously inflammatory language about lawyers.

In January 1989, during the conflict in Northern Ireland, Home Office Minister Douglas Hogg M.P. [said](#) in the House of Commons that some Northern Ireland solicitors were “unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA.” A few weeks later Belfast lawyer Pat Finucane was murdered in front of his family (a case Human Rights First [has worked on for decades](#), supporting the Finucane family’s campaign for a full, independent public inquiry into the murder.)

In an October 2016 [speech](#), in the context of investigations into abuses committed by British soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Northern Ireland, British Prime Minister Theresa May [promised](#) to “never again... let those activist, left-wing human rights lawyers harangue and harass the bravest of the brave—the men and women of Britain’s Armed Forces.”

In 2020 Home Secretary Priti Patel [publicly claimed](#) “activist lawyers” were frustrating the removal of migrants. A few days later, a man with a knife entered a London law office and threatened to kill an immigration lawyer in an attack colleagues [said](#) was inspired by Patel’s remarks. A receptionist was assaulted and wounded. A Confederate flag and far-right literature were reportedly found in a bag the attacker was carrying.

That same month, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson [declared](#) in a speech that he wanted to stop **“ the whole criminal justice system from being hamstrung by what the Home Secretary [Patel] would doubtless and rightly call the lefty human rights lawyers and other do-gooders.”**

Although the Conservative Party was replaced in government by the Labour Party after the July 2024 general election, one immigration lawyer [said](#) the riots felt like the real-life consequences of “unchecked rhetoric” from the government and social media.



“In my view the far right have been emboldened in the UK by irresponsible, inflammatory and hate-filled rhetoric from senior politicians notably the vilification of immigration lawyers by [former Conservative government Home Secretaries] Priti Patel and Suella Braverman who both as Home Secretary made numerous attacks on migrants, in particular those seeking refuge/ asylum, and their lawyers,” Liz Barratt of Bindmans told Human Rights First. **“This public denouncement from very, very senior government ministers made immigration lawyers and our clients easy targets. Their rhetoric showed a disdain for the rule of law and the importance of lawyers in that.”**

She described to Human Rights First how the vilification has developed, and how the rhetoric **“comes on the back of a rise in the right epitomized by [prominent far right politician Nigel] Farage. Brexit started the rehabilitation in public debate of hate filled bigotry: it became acceptable to trash migrants, trash tolerance and spout lies. I think it no coincidence at all that Farage was elected on 4 July to Parliament and by early August the far right are out on the streets.”**

Worldwide attacks

Attacks on immigration lawyers and those offering legal advice to migrants are a worldwide phenomenon. In her [2022 report](#) to the UN General Assembly, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders Mary Lawlor detailed threats and attacks against immigration lawyers in Greece, Lebanon, Mexico, and the United States.

In 2017, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions [denounced](#) “dirty immigration lawyers who are encouraging their otherwise unlawfully present clients to make false claims of asylum providing them with the magic words needed to trigger the credible fear process,” and immigration lawyers working in the U.S. [reported](#) being [targeted](#) by a secret terrorism unit of the Trump administration in 2019.

And in 2021 U.S. members of Congress [urged](#) the Biden administration “to reverse the Trump Administration’s attacks on the National Association of Immigration Judges (NAIJ) and the independence of immigration judges more broadly.”

In Texas and elsewhere in the United States, legal, humanitarian, faith-based, and/or other non-governmental organizations have been targets of anti-immigrant [conspiracy theories](#) and [“invasion” rhetoric](#), unjustified [legal action](#), [violence](#) and [threats of violence](#), and [efforts](#) to cut governmental funding.

Project 2025’s [Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise](#), widely viewed as a blueprint for another Trump administration, recommends that the next U.S. government should **“protect the American workforce from unscrupulous immigration lawyers....”**

The experience of immigration lawyers in Britain, how they are protecting themselves, what the government is doing to protect them, and the mass mobilization of the public to counter



far-right threats should be studied by those providing legal advice to migrants in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Prominent British commentator and social media expert Carole Cadwalladr [warned](#) that what happened in Britain in July and August was used as a trial balloon for Elon Musk before the American elections in November. **“Because just as Brexit prefigured Donald Trump’s election in 2016, there are signs that we [the UK] are again the canary in the coal mine. The same transatlantic patterns, the same playbook, the same figures. But this time with a whole new set of dangerous, unchecked technological vulnerabilities to be exploited... If Musk chooses to ‘predict’ a civil war in the States, what will that look like?”**

Such baseless and inflammatory rhetoric could easily contribute to violence in the United States.

Harjap Singh Bhangal said he would welcome public support from the U.S. legal community and elsewhere in calling out disinformation on social and traditional media aimed at immigration lawyers in the UK.

“You feel isolated like you’re on your own fighting these battles,” he said. “We need to work together across countries - there ought to be a worldwide movement to stop this. The far right is connected internationally, and we should be too. Today it’s immigration lawyers, and the lifeboat workers attacked for rescuing migrants in the [English] channel, but who’s next? Ambulance workers who help injured and ill immigrants? Firefighters who stop migrant hostels burning down when the far right set them alight?”

The aftermath

On August 24, Telegram CEO Pavel Durov [was arrested](#) at a Paris airport on arrival from Azerbaijan. In charges allegedly unrelated to the British riots, he has been placed under formal investigation on organized crime charges, suspected of complicity in running an online platform allowing the posting of child sex abuse images, drug trafficking, and fraud.

The Telegram app is still running, used by a range of people across the world for personal communication, by human rights activists, and by those spreading inflammatory and racist messaging.

After intense violence across many parts of Britain, the riots faded a few weeks later following swift police and court action, and large anti-racist protests across the country which in many cities vastly [outnumbered](#) the far-right demonstrators. However, immigration lawyers are far from sure their safety is guaranteed.





Rally on August 10, 2024, in London calling for solidarity and an end to hate following far-right riots.

"I think we were all hugely relieved and pleased by the outnumbering of the far right by those who came out in support of refugees and communities cleaning up/ repairing damage. The far right, like those [former] Tory Ministers such as Patel and Braverman, misjudge their strength of support," Liz Barratt of Bindmans told Human Rights First. **"The Labour government is far more careful in its rhetoric on migrant issues. I think, whilst many of us are not totally convinced of their immigration policies, we are safer with them in power as are our clients. They have a respect for the rule of law which was sadly wanting in previous Home Secretaries. They recognize the importance of lawyers in a fair process, again something lacking in Patel and Braverman."**

Zoe Bantleman of ILPA warns, **"The immediate risk may have dissipated, and we certainly welcome the swift sentencing that followed the riots, but until the Government takes action to change the negative narrative around migration, to publicly acknowledge that people have the right to seek asylum in the UK, and to prioritize the well-being both of migrants and of those who represent them, immigration practitioners will continue to be unjustly targeted."**

Mobashra Tazamal recommends that the British government should **"Reach out to the affected communities and listen to them and their concerns,"** and **"tackle the Islamophobia within the ranks of the government."**

"We remain vigilant and of course there could be some horror attack," says Liz Barratt of Bindmans. **"I think the number of police on the streets was a real sign that the far right were seen, and being treated, as the violent movement they are. The far right probably loved the attention and trouble they caused but no one could think that they were widely**



supported or represent anything more than a very dangerous but small fringe. Let's hope they go back into the shadows and stay there."

Conclusion

While the sudden, intense, and widespread violence across many British cities was a shock to many, it did not come out of the blue. Immigration lawyers and others trace a long history of inflammatory rhetoric aimed at them and their clients by far-right politicians, including former senior government figures, and by the media.

None of those Human Rights First spoke to for this report believed the dangers have disappeared, and they emphasized the need for continued vigilance and reform. They largely praised the actions of the British police and court system, and the large number of counter-protestors who took to the street, but said more should be done to protect them.

Harjap Singh Bhangal said: **"Does my job put me in harm's way? It shouldn't but last month it did. There are situations where I feel my life is at risk. The government should install panic buttons and cameras in offices like mine – or are we supposed to bear the cost of that? Why aren't the police calling me to check if I'm okay?"**

Attacks on those providing legal advice to migrants are not confined to the UK, and immigration lawyers based in the U.S. and elsewhere should engage with their British counterparts to learn how they might support them, to understand the latest lessons in the methods of the far right, and for advice on how best to counter targeting and attacks.

Recommendations

The UK government should:

- Increase engagement with the affected communities, including those providing legal help to migrants, and respond to their concerns;
- Fully comply with the [1990 UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers](#), including Article 16 to ensure that lawyers are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment, or improper interference, and Article 17 in adequately safeguarding the security of lawyers when they are threatened as a result of discharging their functions;
- Publicly acknowledge the real extent of Islamophobia in British institutions and society;



- Adopt a strategy encouraging the media to avoid the use of hate speech and stereotypes in describing immigrant and minority communities and punish those responsible for content inciting racial discrimination and hatred.

The US legal community should:

- Engage with counterparts in Britain and elsewhere to learn how they protect themselves from far-right targeting;
- Publicly condemn attacks on those providing legal help to migrants in the UK and elsewhere;
- Encourage social media companies based in the U.S. to desist from promoting inflammatory messaging against UK immigration lawyers, immigrants, and others who provide them with humanitarian assistance;
- Encourage religious, legal, political, media, and other leaders in the U.S. to denounce anti-immigrant rhetoric and the targeting of migrants and those who offer them legal help.



Mission statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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Cover photo: Riots in Southport, England in July 2024.

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