

International lawyers sound alarm over counter-terror laws against Filton 18

“warning signs of erosion of the rule of law and democracy in the United Kingdom”

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More than 20 international legal organisations have issued an open letter calling on authorities in the UK to “urgently cease the misuse of counter-terrorism legislation against the Filton 18”.

The letter provides a devastating exposure of the collapse of democracy in Britain, with the right to free speech and protest being overturned.

Eighteen members of Palestine Action (PA)—most aged in their 20s—are being held on remand and face “terrorism connected” prosecution over a protest at Israeli weapons manufacturer Elbit Systems in Filton, near Bristol, last August.

Six members of PA were arrested on August 6, after they drove through security fences in a repurposed police van, entered the factory, and allegedly damaged £1 million of military equipment including “killer drones” used to target and kill Palestinian civilians.

Police arrested eight more PA members between August 8 and 12 over their alleged connection to the protest. In November, the final eight were arrested. All were initially questioned and detained under counter-terrorism laws. They were held for 36 hours, extended to seven days under section 5 of the Terrorism Act (2000).

Their detention under the Act meant police treated PA’s protest as involving the “commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism”.

The open letter challenges the use of counter-terror laws against the Filton 18, connecting it to “a broader pattern of increasing restriction and repression of collective dissent in the United Kingdom, including in relation to the ongoing genocide in Gaza”.

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

Legal groups across six continents have supported the letter published Tuesday. Signatories include the National Lawyers Guild International (USA), International Centre of Justice for

Palestinians (ICJP), Indian Association of Lawyers, Progressive Lawyers’ Association (Turkey), and the Worldwide Lawyers Association (WOLAS).

Although none of the Filton 18 were ultimately charged with terrorism offences—they are charged instead with “criminal damage”, “aggravated burglary” and “violent disorder”—the Crown Prosecution Service has called on the courts to treat their case as having a “terrorist connection”.

The letter explains the impact of such a ruling, “If the court determines that an offence was committed with a terrorism connection, this constitutes an aggravating factor for sentencing.” All 18 have been denied bail and are being subjected to “higher security protocols” in prison due to their initial arrest and detention under counter-terror laws.

United Nations Special Rapporteurs have expressed serious concern about the activists’ detention, investigation and prosecution. This includes periods of “incommunicado detention” imposed on the Filton 18 which UN experts found “*may [have] amount[ed] to enforced disappearance*”. [emphasis in the original]

The first of three separate hearings for the Filton 18 will begin in November 2025, meaning the activists will have been held in prison on remand for well over a year. The youngest of the Filton 18 is just 21 years old.

“The Filton 18 case is a litmus test for democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights in the United Kingdom”, the letter declares. Its authors find the defendants have suffered “serious violations of fair trial rights and other human rights”.

”Chilling effect”

The open letter criticises “the overly broad definition of terrorism in UK legislation” which enables counter-terrorism powers to be used against political protest “that is not genuinely terrorist in nature” producing “a chilling effect on political protests, freedom of expression and opinion, the right to participate

in public life, and political and public discourse.”

The Terrorism Act (2000) and Terrorism Act (2006) used against the Filton 18 were introduced by the Blair Labour government as part of the “War on Terror”, used in justification for war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and the suppression of democratic and legal rights at home.

The lawyers’ groups cite the opinion of UN rapporteurs who warned that police, “*exercised significant powers under counter-terrorism legislation despite the absence of a credible connection between the activists’ conduct to terrorism as properly defined*”. [emphasis in the original]

The UN experts found that anti-terrorism legislation “may have been used to circumvent procedural safeguards in relation to detention, and as a specific and general deterrent” – *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.*” [emphasis in the original]

Political interference

The letter cites evidence of political interference in the targeting and repression of PA activists, including the Filton 18. Documents obtained in April 2025 under Freedom of Information showed the Starmer government “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.”

Earlier documents obtained under FOI, in August 2023, provided “evidence that the Israeli authorities have previously attempted to pressure the UK government to intervene in judicial proceedings relating to UK protests”.

While the UK government routinely denounces “foreign interference” by Russia and China—from manufactured claims about Novichok poisoning of the Skripals in 2018, to recent evidence-free claims of “cyber-attacks” by China on the NHS—senior figures in the Labour government have worked closely with Israeli officials to target and criminalise opponents of the Zionist state and its genocide against the Palestinians.

UK repression of dissent linked to genocide

Significantly, the open letter links the “misuse of anti-terrorism legislation” against the Filton 18 to the UK’s “continuing link to gross human rights violations in Palestine” and to “seemingly unlawful ties between the UK and Israel”.

It cites the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on 26 January 2024, that Israel had a plausible case to answer for genocide in Gaza. “Israel failed to comply with the ICJ’s

provisional measures orders and continued to violate international humanitarian law, including through indiscriminate bombings.”

“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”, the letter states.

Israel has ignored all legal rulings against its homicidal rampage. It 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. Israel’s security minister has most recently revealed Israel’s plans for Gaza to be ‘completely destroyed’.”

Israel’s genocide has killed at least 62,614 Palestinians, including 17,492 children. A further 14,222 Palestinians are reported missing, presumed dead under rubble. But only those who have protested these crimes are behind bars.

While young people in Britain who protest these crimes against humanity are subjected to detention and interrogation reminiscent of a police state, Israel’s state terrorism against a defenceless civilian population, backed militarily, financially and politically by British and US imperialism, proceeds with impunity.

The open letter concludes with a call to action. It demands that UK authorities 1) “urgently cease the misuse of anti-terrorism legislation against the Filton 18, in line with international human rights law”; 2) “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”; 3) “Provide information on measures taken to safeguard the activists’ procedural rights in detention”; and 4) “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.”

The Filton 18 case has major implications for the democratic rights of the British and international working class. It must be fought on that basis. No faith can be placed in appeals to the British state or to a Labour government committed to supporting Israel’s genocide in Gaza. A campaign in defence of the Filton 18 must be mounted in the working class, linking the fight against imperialist war and genocide to the imposition of state repression and austerity against the working class at home.



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