



From Keleti Station to Kilburn High Road and Back

Personal Reflections on Europe's Migration Crisis

Adam LeBor



DANUBE
INSTITUTE

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Image: Irish Naval personnel from the LÉ Eithne (P31) rescuing migrants as part of Operation Triton.
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About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasising the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with centre-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic centre-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

About the Author



Born in London, Adam LeBor is a veteran former foreign correspondent who reported on Hungary and central Europe for many years, writing for *The Times*, *The Independent*, the *Economist* and numerous other publications. He is the author of sixteen critically-acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction, including *Hitler's Secret Bankers* (1997), which was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize, a biography of Slobodan Milosevic and *City of Oranges* (2006), a study of Jewish and Arab families in Jaffa. His most recent work is *The Last Days of Budapest* (2025), the first English-language account of the Hungarian capital throughout the Second World War. He is an experienced editorial consultant and journalism trainer and also teaches creative writing. Married with two children, in his spare time he still enjoys exploring Budapest, a city with so many stories still to tell.

From Keleti Station to Kilburn High Road and Back

Adam LeBor

Abstract

Reflecting on the demographic changes wrought across Europe by mass migration, Adam LeBor charts the story of how the migration crisis has reshaped much of the continent. Comparing Hungary's resistance to the 2015 shock-wave, LeBor examines countries—such as Britain and Sweden—which have undergone significant demographic changes. Britain, he argues, has experienced drastic societal upheaval as a consequence of these shifts. From LeBor's birthplace in North London to the increasingly Islamicised former mill towns of Yorkshire, much of British society now appears visibly in decline. Contrary to Angela Merkel's infamous lines—“*wir schaffen das*” (we can do it) —the migration crisis has precipitated dangerous social phenomena including the rise of organised and gang crime, rape, sexual assaults and soaring rates of anti-Semitism.

With thanks to Markus Johansson-Martis and Alexander Pelling-Bruce.



Migrant child at Keleti station, Budapest, in summer 2015, holding a sign showing how Germany was a favoured destination for Syrian migrants. (© Adam LeBor)

Introduction

One reason why I became a foreign correspondent was to see new places and have adventures. I've looped the loop in a Slovak fighter plane, hitched a lift home to Budapest on a prime minister's jet and reluctantly turned down an offer to buy a Mig-29 for \$8 million in a bar in Odessa. I've stood on the ashes of an extermination camp in Poland, where the air was thick with flies, and felt the backdraft of a bullet as it whizzed over my shoulder in a motel in Bosnia that had turned into a battleground (I hit the floor in nano-seconds). I've been tear-gassed in Belgrade and Bucharest. Romanian tear-gas is like a bad attack of hay fever—Serbian has you crawling on the floor. I've even been arrested and held at gunpoint as a suspected spy in Croatia during the independence war.

These events, moving, exciting and sometimes terrifying as they were, were not always a surprise. Wars, regime change and unrest breed chaos. It's expected. But the most surreal scenes of my career unfolded somewhere far more prosaic: the forecourt of Keleti station in the summer of 2015. I knew the station well. Keleti was my arrival point on my very first visit to Budapest, back in the winter of 1990. I was on assignment for *Elle* magazine with a mission to explore the bright lights of the Hungarian capital. I took the train from Berlin and it all seemed impossibly romantic as we trundled into the grand old Austro-Hungarian pile. Keleti, which means eastern, was still the departure point for trains east and south, to Kiev, Belgrade and Bucharest, all of which, over the coming years, I went on to take.

“Social democratic views of the 1960s are now considered far right-wing—a psychological trauma as if straight out of an Ingmar Bergman movie.”¹

Dr. Göran Adamson, Swedish migration expert.

But that summer nobody was going anywhere, at least not across borders. Keleti was the epicentre of Europe's migration crisis. Tens of thousands of people, many claiming to be from Syria, were traipsing on foot from Turkey, through Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, into Hungary. The station, its

immediate surrounds and the nearby streets and park had become an urban refugee camp. Thousands of people were gathered there amid the detritus of their nomadic lives. The area around the station was carpeted with cigarette ends, half-eaten sandwiches, mineral water bottles, biscuits and fast-food wrappers. It was estimated that at least 150,000 people had entered Hungary. Few intended to stay, but entering Hungary was one of the most difficult steps on their great trek north and west: once inside the country, they had entered the Schengen zone and so could, in theory, travel west to Portugal or north to the Netherlands with no border controls. The exodus may or may not have been organized—a decade on, it is still unclear why, and how, Europe's borders collapsed so quickly—but it was evident that the migrants were tech-savvy. They plotted their routes through Europe on WhatsApp groups and via Google Maps.

The migrants came from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, parts of Africa and other countries. At that time, as the country was consumed by a savage civil war, there was widespread sympathy for Syrian refugees. Some were well-educated and fluent in English, scrolling through their iPhones as they waited for news. I spoke to Mohammed, a mechanical engineer from Damascus, travelling with his wife, Wesal, a physics teacher. Both said they planned to settle in Germany. Nearby I found a small family group of Syrians: Ahmed, a lawyer from Tel Hamis, who had travelled with his wife, son and parents on the Balkan route from Turkey to Greece, then north to Hungary. “The war in Syria is very bad. In Germany, I can live in security and freedom,” he said. One morning after talking to a young man in his twenties, who said he was Syrian, an elderly man in a dark green suit sidled up to me. He had a thin, hawkish face, spoke with an Arabic accent and was clearly not Hungarian.

“Everything these people are telling you is a lie,” he announced, then walked off and quickly disappeared into the crowd. Looking back, I wish I had followed him and asked him more questions. How did he know? And who was he? Was he lying? Or the young man who said he was Syrian? A lot of people were lying that summer.



Migrant children and teenagers playing football at Keleti station in summer 2015. (© Adam LeBor)

The Unanswered Questions

A decade after the refugee crisis, so many questions still linger unanswered. How had Europe's borders collapsed so quickly? How had hundreds of thousands of people simply trekked through the southern part of the continent? And why was my coverage, and that of so many reporters, then so sympathetic? In part because, as noted above, some of the scenes at Keleti and the stories of the migrants were genuinely moving. Among many of the journalists covering the migrant crisis, there was a sense that somehow those arriving at Keleti had right on their side. That it was acceptable to be there, with the expectation of eventual sanctuary in Western Europe, where the migrants would eventually become citizens and contribute to the greater good. But events after 2015, as we now know, did not turn out like that. It was our job as reporters not to stand around feeling sorry for people, but ask the tough questions, ones that might garner uncomfortable answers.

This was, after all, an organized invasion of Europe—one with powerful, influential supporters. Some were human traffickers, bringing the refugees from the Middle East. People-smuggling had become a multi-billion-dollar industry. The traffickers provided fake papers, guides, accommodation on the route and rubber boats for those crossing the Mediterranean. The migrants ran up huge debts they could not repay and so entered servitude. This aspect of the story garnered much less attention.

Other supporters of the migrants were liberal politicians and global opinion leaders. In mid-September 2015, the financier and philanthropist George Soros published an article entitled “Rebuilding the Asylum System” on Project Syndicate. In the article, which is still available online, Soros called for the EU to accept “at least a million asylum-seekers a year for the foreseeable future”. In addition, the EU should provide at least €15,000 per asylum seeker per year for two years to cover housing, health care and education. Soros’s plan then called for a total of €15 billion a year to be spent on migrants and asylum seekers. The article caused both anger and incredulity, especially as the average monthly wage then in Hungary in 2015 was around €800 a month and just over €300 a month in Romania. The sum of €15 billion was to be raised, claimed Soros, by issuing long-term bonds.²

Nine years later, in 2024, I asked several Hungarian officials whom they blamed for the 2015 refugee crisis. They all pointed the finger at Soros and his Open Society Foundations. Certainly, Soros’s article was a gift to the Orbán

government, then engaged in a rancorous culture war over the Central European University in Budapest, which was eventually forced to relocate to Vienna. But the idea that one man and his network of activist groups, no matter how influential, could engineer the collapse of Europe’s borders and the movement of hundreds of thousands of people was fanciful, if not absurd. I also asked the OSF what, if any, role it had played in the 2015 crisis. It directed me to a 2015 statement that said that neither Soros nor the OSF had “funded the production or distribution of materials to aid people smugglers”. Nor had the OSF encouraged people to “leave their own countries”. But the OSF had supported organizations in Greece that provided legal assistance to migrants and refugees, and that monitored and documented their reception on arrival and in the Balkans for “emergency response efforts and longer-term initiatives to ease the crisis”.

Hungary responded to the migrant crisis by building a secure border fence and deploying well-trained, determined border guards to stop the migrants from entering illegally. Hungary, then, was protecting the Schengen zone from unknown people, many of whom had torn up their identity cards and passports. But instead of support, Hungary received a barrage of criticism. Somehow, a nation defending itself from waves of invaders, many of them men in their twenties, had become an affront to democracy. That was the start of a process, now ongoing and embedded across Europe and Britain through legal mechanisms, that often put the human rights of migrants, including those arriving illegally, above the security of the populations where they would soon be relocated, especially the security of young women and girls.

That September 2015, I was one of a small group of journalists to interview Viktor Orbán. Hungary was once again Europe’s “bad boy” and it was clear that the prime minister was loving every minute, enjoying the world’s attention, although he was also puzzled at the level of criticism. What, exactly, was Hungary doing wrong by defending the southern border, not just of Europe but of the whole Schengen zone, to tens of thousands of unknown people?

“We are the only country in the last month to take seriously and put real effort into following the Schengen regulations. For that we are criticised. That is the strangest story I have seen since we joined the EU.”³



Volunteers play with migrant children at a makeshift kindergarten at Keleti station during the migrant crisis. (© Adam LeBor)

It seems more likely that Hungary's real sin was not to disagree with Angela Merkel's famous statement about coping with the refugee crisis that "*Wir schaffen das!*" (We can do it), but more to believe, and state clearly, that "We don't want to do it". Orbán was clear that Hungary would remain a Christian majority country and that there would be no large-scale Muslim migration. If Germany, France, Austria, Sweden or their neighbours wished to admit tens or hundreds of thousands of Muslim migrants, well, that was their right. But Hungary would not be taking that path.

A decade on, with the rise in sexual assault, crime and gang violence, and the explosion of anti-Semitism across Europe, Orbán's observations are more prescient than ever. Muslim communities live in parallel societies and do not integrate, he said. "I am speaking about culture and the everyday principles of life such as sexual habits, freedom of expression, equality between men and women and all those kinds of values which I call Christianity". Other countries were of course free to allow the rise and establishment of such parallel Muslim societies. "But we Hungarians would not like to have it".⁴

At the time, Hungarian officials also warned that it was impossible to know who was entering the country and moving across Europe. Later, it became clear that Europe's collapsing borders provided easy entry to Islamist terrorists. Seven of the nine terrorists who carried out the November 2015 terror attack in Paris passed through Hungary, according to Hungarian officials. A total of fourteen members of ISIS terror cells used Hungary as a gateway to Western Europe. Some took part in the Brussels terror attacks in March 2016 that killed 32 people. György Bakondi, Hungary's chief security adviser, later told me in an interview that many of the migrants had destroyed their papers. "Terrorists were mingled with the migrants from terror. The people who were arriving had no travel documents at all. So their identity was established totally at the mercy of what they were saying".



Migrant encampment at Keleti station, summer 2015. Thousands of people lived in poor hygienic conditions. (© Adam LeBor)

Media Savvy Migrants

The migrants were also extremely media-aware. Each morning, a group gathered in front of Keleti station, sitting quietly and in well-spaced, orderly concentric circles. In the centre of the arrangement sat a young, photogenic boy, holding a piece of cardboard that said “Syria (hearts) Germany”. Each time one of the numerous television crews walked by, the boy held up the piece of cardboard, as those around him started chanting “Germany, Germany”. Everyone knew that being Syrian provided the fastest route to Western Europe and the ultimate prize of a German passport.

The migrants engendered plenty of sympathy. Whatever one thought about the migrant crisis, on a human level, it was impossible not to be moved by their situation. I saw young boys, barely in their teens, travelling alone with all their possessions in their rucksacks and whole families huddled in tents or makeshift shelters. One morning, I watched a middle-aged man sleeping on a sheet of cardboard, with his arm protectively around his daughter, who was perhaps ten or twelve years old. She was about my daughter’s age. For a moment, I wondered what had brought them to Hungary and what the future held in store. At Keleti, like the two other main train stations, Nyugati and Deli, municipal officials set up “Transit zones” inside the station. I saw several hundred people clustered there. A rudimentary system of basic services provided water for drinking and washing, while there were a few showers and toilets. Volunteers distributed food, water, clean clothing, soap and nappies. A rota of doctors and nurses even provided basic medical care. There was a makeshift kindergarten by the entrance to the metro station, while other volunteers set up a free Wi-Fi network. Just as in the actual Middle East, plenty of middle-aged men sat around all day drinking coffee and smoking, while women in headscarves busied themselves with their children. In a section of the open plaza, down the stairs, a group of young boys played football. “Shabab, shabab, youths, youths,” shouted one man as the ball bounced around nearby.

Looking back, it seems a miracle that there was no public health crisis or violent disorder. Thousands were gathered in an open space with inadequate sanitation and a lack of infrastructure. There were plenty of police officers around the station, mostly making sure that the migrants did not enter and get on trains out of Hungary. I asked a government official why the authorities were not doing more to provide basic services. The official replied that the government did not want to “institutionalize an illegal situation”. On September 4, a long column of refugees set off from Keleti, marching through Budapest, towards the Austrian border. After a while, the government sent a fleet of buses to transport them westwards. That year, around 1.2 million migrants applied for asylum across the European Union, with Germany receiving around 440,000.

Merkel’s confidence about Germany’s capacity to absorb hundreds of thousands of people had a wider resonance. As Germany was—and still is—Europe’s largest, most populous and economically powerful state, the implication was that Europe as a whole could cope with the mass influx of migrants from non-European countries. Viktor Orbán saw things more clearly. “To understand what we must do, we need to grasp the true nature of the situation we are facing. Europe is not in the grip of a ‘refugee problem’ or ‘refugee situation’, but the European continent is threatened by an ever-mounting wave of modern-era migration,” he wrote in an op-ed article for *Frankfurter Allegemeiner Zeitung*. “We must acknowledge that the European Union’s misguided immigration policy is responsible for this situation...If Europe does not return to the path of common sense, it will find itself laid low in a battle for its fate...We have no option but to defend our borders”.⁵

PRINCESS

BARBERS & BEAUTY

Migrants in Keleti Station. (© Adam LeBor)

M 2

4

Keleti pályaudvar

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M 4

M 1





The Balkanisation of North London and Sweden

The 2015 migrant crisis changed Europe forever in numerous ways: demographically, politically, culturally and in terms of public safety. It led to the rise of anti-migration parties, such as the AfD in Germany, the Sweden Democrats and Reform in Britain. Many of these changes are measurable. What is less so, but no less evident, is that much of Europe, and Britain, is simply a very different place compared to thirty, twenty, even ten years ago. Consider my home town of London. I recently returned to Hungary after six years living on the edge of north London. By the end of my stay, the high street had been near-colonized by Albanians. There were five cafes full of men in leather jackets, hunched over their mobile telephones, drinking coffee, smoking and staring at passers-by. On one level, as a former foreign correspondent who spent much time in the Balkans, it was a familiar scene, such as could be witnessed any day in Belgrade, Tirana or Sofia. And in fairness, neither I nor anyone I knew experienced any unpleasant physical incidents from these Balkan gentlemen, who were not interested in low-level street crime. Nevertheless, the change in the overall atmosphere, cigarette smoke aside, was unsettling, especially for women. It's also worth noting that as of April 2024, there were just over 10,400 foreign nationals held in custody in England and Wales. Of these, 13% were Albanian, a notably high proportion.⁶ Many were convicted for crimes including drug supply and importation, violence and immigration offences.

The transformation of Sweden from a high-trust, previously largely homogenous and socially cohesive society to one rent asunder by migrant and gang violence has been sharp. During the 2015 refugee crisis, Sweden received 163,000 migrants. Five years later, a Swedish 2020 study showed that 73% of suspects for murder, manslaughter and attempted murder were migrants, as were 70% of suspects for robbery. By 2017, the murder rate in Sweden had quadrupled. The following year, a Swedish television programme researched every individual registered for rape or attempted rape between 2012 and 2017. Fifty-eight per cent were foreign-born. That same year, a newspaper researched those involved in group rape—a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden—of whom 73% were foreign-born.⁷

Sweden now has one of the highest rates of gun homicide in Europe, with about four deaths per million per year. The average is about 1.6 deaths per million.⁸ Not all armed attacks involved guns. In recent years, migrant gangs have used hand grenades in hundreds of attacks in their struggles for control of territory and smuggling operations. In 2014, there were 317 explosive attacks, while by January 27, 2025, criminals had carried out 27 bombings in that month alone.⁹ The Swedish police report for 2025 showed the country had around 17,500 active gang-involved criminals, and a further 50,000 people are considered likely to be involved with gang violence—an increase of around 5,500 from 2024.¹⁰ Gangs increasingly recruit children to carry out the attacks, including attempted murders, as they are judged to be below the age of criminal responsibility.¹¹ The situation became so dangerous that in October 2025 the Swedish police issued an advisory statement, calling on the public to be vigilant, with detailed instructions on what to do if they encounter a suspected hand grenade or explosive device. These include staying away from windows, seeking shelter behind a concrete wall, warning others and calling the emergency services.¹²

In Sweden, as in other modern Western liberal democracies, to highlight such statistics or question why they exist is often to be branded a racist or far-right winger. Yet there is nothing inherently “right-wing”—whatever that may mean—about believing in national sovereignty, controlled borders and being opposed to soaring crime rates and the widespread social changes brought about by mass migration. Across Europe, Britain and the United States, much of the modern left has shifted away from safeguarding the rights of everyday people, in favour of welcoming newcomers who may infringe on their safety and security. Somehow, as Göran Adamson, the author of the 2017 Swedish study notes, “a silent revolution has occurred at the heart of the reformist left”.

Now, diversity is said to give us prosperity, while defending the rights of a unified population is fraught with imminent political risks. Social democratic views of the 1960s are now considered far right-wing—a psychological trauma as if straight out of an Ingmar Bergman movie.¹³

Dubai

SHAWARMA GRILL

Dubai

SHAWARMA - GRILL - PIZZA - FATAYER - ROAST CHICKEN

Kilburn High Road, north-west London, summer 2015, Dubai shawarma restaurant. (© Adam LeBor)

The surge in migrant violence has not been confined to Sweden. Perhaps not surprisingly, the mass admission of young men in their twenties and thirties from highly unstable, violent and underdeveloped countries, many of which are at war, with primitive attitudes to women, girls and Jewish people, has increased the risk of violent crime and sexual assault across much of western Europe. Certainly, many of the new arrivals to Germany in 2015 did not waste any time. On New Year's Eve in Cologne, around one thousand young men, many of North African origin, gathered next to the city's landmark Gothic cathedral. The scene quickly descended into terror for women in the crowd. Packs of young men were soon hunting them down. Hundreds were sexually assaulted and some raped. In the days after, 1,210 criminal complaints were made, including 511 sexual assaults, and 28 cases of rape or attempted rape.¹⁴ Cologne was the worst example, but sexual violence was also reported across the country in twelve states, from Hamburg in the north to Nuremberg and Munich in the south.¹⁵

The mass sexual assaults were outliers in that they were not repeated in subsequent years, partly because of increased policing and a legislative crackdown with more protection for victims. The long-term trend of migrant crime in Germany has, however, parallels with Sweden, although without as many grenade attacks. According to German police statistics, of the 3.2 million recorded offences in 2023, around 345,000, or more than one in ten, had at least one suspect classified as a "Zuwanderer", broadly defined as a migrant, refugee, or illegal immigrant.¹⁶

Kilburn High Road, Hilal Food Centre (© Adam LeBor)



A Teacher Forced into Hiding

Not all of the corrosive effects of mass migration can be traced to the 2015 crisis. Some have much deeper and more resilient roots. In May 2021, a group of young men travelled from Blackburn, Lancashire, a northern town and its surrounds that are now 35% Muslim, to London as part of a convoy of 200 cars. The vehicles, some draped in Palestinian flags, drove through sections of the city with a large Jewish population, including Finchley Road, a main artery into central London. Several men allegedly shouted from a megaphone, “Fuck the Jews... Fuck all of them. Fuck their mothers, fuck their daughters and show your support for Palestine”. Finchley Road is extensively monitored by police CCTV cameras. It has a speed limit of 20 miles per hour (32 kilometres). This is a difficult speed to drive at, and miscreants, who may take their eye off the speedometer and inadvertently creep up to 24 or 25 miles an hour (the previous limit was 30), can expect swift justice in the form of a penalty notice.

Yet Britain’s two-tier justice system, it is increasingly clear, has one rule for middle-class drivers and quite another for convoys of young Muslim men of mainly Pakistani background, who proceeded freely with their vehicles, Palestinian flags and megaphones. The convoy was not monitored by the police, but a member of the public had captured the vehicle licence plates. Some hours later, the police arrested four men on suspicion of a racially aggravated public order offence. All four pleaded not guilty. By November 2022, the Crown Prosecution Service had dropped all charges against all four men, saying there was no realistic prospect of a conviction.

It was no coincidence that the convoy drove to London from the north of England. In parts of that region, residents are experiencing a form of Islamic governance and its consequences. In March 2021, a teacher in a school in Batley, a town in Yorkshire with a high Muslim population, gave a lesson about free speech. Ironically, considering later developments, the class explored different ways to respond to religious disagreements. The teacher reportedly showed the class a caricature of Muhammad wearing a turban containing a bomb. As Kenan Malik, a well-regarded writer, noted in the *Guardian*, the lesson had been taught for two years without problems. These Muslim community activists and self-appointed leaders sensed an opportunity. They organized protests at the school against the teacher and named him. Instead of defending their staff member against outside intimidation, the school suspended him and apologized.

Death threats followed, and the teacher and his family went into hiding, where, more than four years later, they remain. At this point, it is worth taking a step back and considering this situation as coolly and objectively as possible. A teacher and his family are in hiding because he showed his pupils a cartoon of Muhammad. What should be a national scandal and a catalyst for serious soul-searching is nothing of the sort. In fact, his fate is barely mentioned outside the pages of conservative media and by some supportive MPs. In any case, several Islamic traditions include images and representations of Muhammad, including those of Iran, Turkey and India. Batley, and Britain’s, problem is that the authorities repeatedly, and cravenly, surrender to a hard-line, highly puritanical strain of Islam that assumes it is the sole representative of a multi-threaded religion. As Malik noted:

“The problem exposed by cases such as Batley derives neither from the presence of Muslims in this country, nor from the giving of offence, but from the way that reactionary groups and leaders have to be seen representing those communities, an approach that serves to silence many Muslim voices and traditions.”¹⁷

The failure of the British authorities to defend a citizen who had committed no crime or illegal act, but merely offended self-appointed Islamic leaders, was duly noted and approved by those leaders. Almost two years later, in February 2023, four pupils were suspended from a school in Wakefield, seven miles away, after a copy of the Quran was damaged. A detailed report on the BBC noted that the book sustained a “slight tear to the cover and smears of dirt on some of the pages”. Once again, school leaders backed down. Tudor Griffiths, the school’s headmaster, issued a statement:

We would like to reassure all our community that the holy book remains fully intact and that our initial enquiries indicate there was no malicious intent on the part of those involved. However we have made it very clear that their actions did not treat the:

“Quran with the respect it should have so those involved have been suspended and we will be working with them to understand why their actions were unacceptable.”¹⁸

Soon after the incident one of the boys, a 14-year-old who had received death threats, and his mother were summoned to a session at a local mosque. Incredibly—or perhaps not in today’s Britain—the kangaroo court was also attended by an imam, two senior police officers and two teachers.

BAGHDAD

بغداد



خنز تور

arma, Falafel, Pizza, Manakish, Naan, Samoun, Breakfast

OPEN



Kilburn High Road, Baghdad shawarma restaurant (© Adam LeBor)

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There, the mother, wearing a hijab, pleaded for forgiveness for her son. The host of this grotesque spectacle, the imam of the mosque, declared: “When it comes to the honour of the Quran we will stand and defend the honour of the Quran, no matter what it takes.” The Imam later described homosexuality as “barbaric”, music as “toxic” and warned his congregation not to wish people a “Merry Christmas”.¹⁹

Yorkshire: Britain's Heart of Darkness

It is no coincidence that Yorkshire is also the epicentre of the greatest state failure and the biggest scandal in modern British history, one directly caused by mass migration. For decades, gangs of mostly Pakistani men raped, assaulted and trafficked thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of vulnerable young girls while the authorities stood by and watched.²⁰ The girls, many of whom lived in care homes or orphanages, frequently asked the authorities for help. But craven officials, fearful of being branded racist, had decided that “community relations” and “community cohesion” mattered more than the victims’ safety.

Barely pubescent girls were subjected to sustained sexual attacks, sometimes lasting days, while they were incarcerated in flats or hotels, by groups of men. They emerged bruised, traumatized and sometimes covered in bite marks. Many were picked up by the gangs after school or from the children’s homes where they lived. The teachers and staff at the homes did not intervene. The gangs’ methodology was carefully planned. They targeted the most vulnerable girls, those without a family, plied them with drugs and alcohol and somehow persuaded them that their abuser was some kind of “boyfriend”. The girls were then passed around and forced to have sex with numerous men. *Groomed*, a searing documentary by Channel 4, recounted how social workers somehow regarded the young girls as youthful prostitutes, instead of abused children. On one occasion, the mother of one girl took her to a police station, covered with bite marks and her knickers full of semen. The police took no action. Victoria Agoglia, a 15-year-old who was being abused, wrote to the authorities detailing her torture, a desperate plea for help from an abused and vulnerable child. No action was taken. In September 2003 she was injected with heroin by a 50-year-old man and died.

Many of the local authorities, councillors and MPs for the affected constituencies represented the Labour Party. The politicians, dependent on Pakistani community block-votes often directed by self-appointed leaders and elders, readily abandoned the trafficked girls. In this world, the views of women were irrelevant. As a 2015 paper on Pakistani local politics by two British academics notes:

“A dominant feature of South Asian Muslim politics in the UK has been community bloc voting along lines of kinship (biraderi). The use of kinship networks for political gain effectively disenfranchised many young people and women.”²¹

Some officials, such as police officers or social workers, even blamed the victims for being assaulted. The British state’s catastrophic failure remains a sensitive topic. After Channel 4 aired *Groomed*, Tim Montgomerie, a conservative journalist, appeared on Question Time, the BBC’s high-profile public affairs discussion programme. The panellists included Lucy Powell, a Labour MP and the leader of the House of Commons. Montgomery asked her if she had seen the programme. She sneered in response: “Oh, we want to blow that little trumpet now do we? Let’s get that dog whistle out shall we?”²² Her remarks triggered widespread revulsion, especially among rape gang survivors. Powell later said she was challenging “the political point-scoring” around the issues, had dealt with “horrendous cases” and was “very sorry for those remarks”. Powell’s misstep had no effect on her continuing rise. She is now deputy leader of the Labour Party.

Eventually, after vast public outrage and pressure, the government reluctantly committed to a statutory national enquiry—one led not by a judge but a Labour member of the House of Lords. Meanwhile, the boatloads of illegal migrants keep arriving, often escorted or rescued by the Royal Navy or Border Force. In the year to early December 2025, around 46,000 people crossed the Channel on small boats. Britain once stood alone against Nazi Germany but nowadays is unable to defend its borders against migrants in rubber boats. Once safely landed, many are housed in comfortable hotels. There they receive three meals a day, free medical and dental care and pocket money, while being guarded by security staff. Any children arriving may attend school, but around two-thirds of those arriving on small boats are men in their twenties and thirties. Dropped into a culture with radically different attitudes towards women from their home countries, many have extreme difficulty adjusting to Western norms. Some go on to commit crimes of sexual assault and even murder.

The British state, so efficient at arresting those who post unacceptable thoughts on social media or WhatsApp, has proved incompetent at protecting its female citizens. Indeed, it imports those who seek to harm them and provides them with sanctuary. In October 2024, an asylum seeker from Sudan killed Rhiannon White, who had been working at the hotel in Walsall where he was staying. She was stabbed twenty-three times with a screwdriver. In September of the following year, Hadush Kebatu, an Ethiopian migrant, was imprisoned after sexually assaulting a teenage girl and a woman while living in an asylum-seekers' hotel in Essex. The following month, Kebatu was mistakenly released from prison. He was eventually re-arrested after a two-day manhunt and eventually deported to Ethiopia, with a cash gift of £500. In a particularly horrific case, two teenage asylum seekers from Afghanistan were imprisoned in December 2025 for nine and ten years for the rape of a 15-year-old girl in Leamington Spa in central England. Mobile phone footage showed the girl screaming for help, but one of her attackers put his hand over her mouth and forced her into parkland, where he and his companion raped her.

Hamas Supporters Empowered Across Europe

The aftermath of the October 7 attack, when Hamas terrorists killed 1,291 people, including 38 children, reanimated and empowered the world's oldest hatred. Some even celebrated the slaughter while it was still unfolding. In Neukölln, Berlin, Hamas supporters handed out baklava, a sticky pastry, to celebrate the attack. Such groups are now so empowered that in November 2024, Barbara Slowik, the Berlin police chief, warned Jewish and gay people to be careful when travelling in areas with large Arab populations. "Unfortunately there are certain neighbourhoods where there are mostly Arab people who also have sympathy for terrorist groups." In the year after October 7, Berlin police opened investigations into 6,200 hate crimes against Jews, including 1,300 physical assaults or resistance to arrest.²³ Eighty years after the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the Third Reich, the German capital once again has no-go areas for Jews and minorities.

The British authorities' repeated failures to protect its Jewish community laid the ground for an explosion of anti-Semitism after the October 7 terror attacks. A toxic alliance formed between sections of the Muslim community and much of the woke progressive left. The streets of central London were soon filled, week after week, with tens, sometimes hundreds of thousands of people calling for the destruction of the State of Israel. Ancient images and slurs reappeared as if from the medieval era: of blood-soaked babies, twisted stars of David and worse. The Metropolitan Police were unable or unwilling to take control of public space, thus ceding it to the radicals. On October 21, 2023, activists from Hizb at-Tahrir, an Islamist group then banned in Germany and much of the Muslim world, protested outside the Egyptian and Turkish embassies in London. At least one of the protestors openly called for "jihad". And then events took a turn surreal even by the standards of the Metropolitan Police. Asked why they had not arrested him, the force issued a tweet. It said:

"The word jihad has a number of meanings but we know the public will most commonly associate it with terrorism. We have specialist counter terrorism officers here in the operations room who have particular knowledge in this area."

Those officers, the tweet continued, had assessed the video and had not identified any offence arising from the "specific clip". It is true that the literal meaning of "jihad" is something like "exert strength and effort" to accomplish a task

and overcome obstacles. The term is generally understood to mean "holy war", although in certain circumstances, it can mean something like the "struggle for self-enlightenment". This latter interpretation, it seems, was chosen by the Metropolitan Police. Others may differ in their view.

In Britain, like Germany, the months after October 7 saw anti-Semitism soar to record levels. In 2023, the Community Security Trust (CST), the Jewish community's security organization, recorded 4,103 incidents of anti-Jewish hate across the country, its highest-ever annual total. That figure was a 147% rise from 2022. Incredibly, two-thirds of these incidents were recorded after October 7, with 1,330 incidents in October 2023 alone—a rate of 44 per day. Thus, the worst slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust triggered the longest and most intense burst of anti-Semitic attacks in Britain since records began. The CST also recorded 266 assaults for the year. Another 2,185 incidents were reported to the CST but were not included. Many involved suspicious activity such as potential hostile reconnaissance of Jewish locations or criminal activity that did not include anti-Semitic targeting.²⁴ As Douglas Murray wrote in the Spectator, just over two years after October 7:

"From early October 2023 it was clear where all this would lead. The first marchers on the streets of London and elsewhere included open calls for 'jihad', 'intifada' and for 'Muslim armies' to arise...the truth is that the events of the past two years have revealed a clear problem that has been ignored for too long: a culture of open incitement, lies and hatred by people who hate not just the Jewish state and the Jews of Britain, but our society as a whole, and consider it a worthy target for terrorism and destruction."²⁵

Where all this led was manifest on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and the holiest days in the Jewish calendar, on October 2, 2025. It is not known how the Metropolitan police interpret the name of Jihad al-Shamie, a Syrian born terrorist who attacked the Heaton Park synagogue that day. But perhaps his actions may cause them to gain a deeper understanding of radical Islamist theology. The aptly-named Syrian drove into the gates of the synagogue, running over a security guard. He then stabbed two security volunteers. One, Melvin Cravitz, 66, died from his injuries. The terrorist then ran at the synagogue doors, brandishing a large knife. Inside the synagogue, worshippers barricaded the entrance. Police arrived quickly and opened fire, killing al-Shamie. Tragically, one of their bullets passed through the door and hit one of the worshippers, passing through his chest and killing a man standing with him.

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Kilburn High Road, Al-Mahdi Supermarket (© Adam LeBor)

A New London, But One Never Voted For

The demographic change in my home city of London has been less violent, but is almost certainly irreversible. By 2021 about 40% of Londoners were foreign-born.²⁶ The city was home to around 270 nationalities and 300 languages, bringing a wealth of new cuisines, music, cultures and faiths—but also a lingering sense that a once familiar cityscape was being dramatically remodelled.²⁷ Such changes are often difficult to discuss. Those objecting to or questioning them are likely to find themselves dubbed “far-right” or “racist”. But it is neither far-right nor racist to question how and why such a rapid, thorough transformation has taken place. No party included this demographic change in their manifesto and the population has never been meaningfully asked for their views on mass migration. It has simply happened, or been imposed by a series of Labour and Conservative governments.

Yet the question is less one of race and colour than integration. The Albanians in leather jackets who have colonized a small corner of north-west London are white Europeans. At the same time, it would be unimaginable to think of today’s London without Brixton, the city’s vibrant centre of Afro-Caribbean culture that is now a vital part of the modern British capital. Or Golders Green as a centre of Jewish life, with its numerous synagogues, and Jewish and Israeli restaurants. It is also evident, however, that some serious social problems remain with sections of the second and third generation of those of immigrant background. Young black males, for example, are substantially over-represented as both perpetrators and victims of knife crime. Around 13.5% of London’s population is black. Yet 45% of the 726 offenders sentenced for carrying knives between 2013 and 2023 were black. So were 49% of the 739 people fatally stabbed in that decade.²⁸

These changes have implications beyond demography—for public safety and simply feeling at home on the streets where Londoners such as myself were born and grew up. Perhaps the German word “*unheimlich*” says it best. The word literally translates as “unhomely” but means something like “unsettled” or “uneasy”. This is certainly the case in, for example, Whitechapel, an area of east London with a substantial population of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage. A century ago, Whitechapel was a centre of Jewish life. Many newly arrived immigrants settled there, including my own grandparents. But it would, after October 7, be a brave or foolhardy Jewish person who walked on those same streets wearing a kippah, or skullcap. Doubtless emboldened by the failure of the authorities to take control of central London since the October 7 attacks, Islamic radicals of Pakistani or

Bangladeshi descent now declare who will and who will not be allowed to enter the area. After the Metropolitan Police banned a planned march by members of the United Kingdom Independence Party in Whitechapel in October 2025, masked local young Muslim men took to a stage in a counter-protest. Their chants included “Zionist scum, off our streets” and “With our souls and our blood we will redeem you, oh al-Aqsa”, referencing the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, a chant often used by Hamas leaders—even though the planned UKIP protest had no Jewish or Israel connection whatsoever. Many of the masked protestors then prayed in the streets, blocking the thoroughfare. Not surprisingly, the police later said that no action would be taken against anyone.²⁹

I grew up in Kilburn during the 1960s and 1970s, then a lower-middle-class quarter of north-west London. The long streets of fine Edwardian terraced houses were home to so many Irish people that it was affectionately known as “County Kilburn”. It was said that the many public houses on the High Road, some dating back to the 15th century, were popular collection points for those raising money for Irish republicans. Those who declined to support the struggle were politely asked to “do their drinking somewhere else”. One public house, Biddy Mulligan’s, was even bombed by Ulster loyalists in December 1975. On Saturdays, I worked as a delivery boy in a butcher’s and still remember the single Irishmen coming in to buy slabs of rump steak for their weekend dinner. Nowadays many of the Irish families have migrated further out, to Harrow and Wembley. Kilburn has, for decades, been home to substantial Black Caribbean and Black African communities, who are well-integrated. The area’s population is now around a quarter to a third White British, lower than the London average, but not untypical.

The most surprising change is what we could call, for want of a better term, the Arabization of Kilburn High Road. Much of it is now unrecognizable from the street I knew so well when I grew up. On a recent walk along its length, I counted just one Irish butcher. The small family shops—the newsagents, toy emporiums and others—had been replaced by a legion of Arabic enterprises. Most have large Arabic script alongside English on their storefronts. At number 332 was the Hilal Food Centre, with an in-house Halal butcher. Next to it was the closed-looking Kilburn Social Club and Shisha. Across the road at 339 was Baghdad shawarma. Number 292 hosted the black-fronted Kilburn Islamic Centre, while at number 282 was Barakat Jewellers, its sign in English on one side and Arabic on the other. A few doors

away was the Taaj money exchange and mobile telephone shop. Across the road in a clutch of three shops stood the halal Kilburn Meat Village and Faris fishmonger, both with signs in English and Arabic on their shopfronts, next to the Khyber Afghan carpet shop and Al Rasool Mall, also in English and Arabic. Across the road, near Transfer East, a money transfer shop, next door to the Al-Quds supermarket, both also emblazoned with Arabic writing. Nearby, the corner of Messina Avenue and part of the street had been taped off by the police and a police car was parked. The officers declined to say what had happened, but it seemed very likely that a violent altercation had taken place.

Further down the road were the Basil Bakery, again with large Arabic script; Hijaboo, selling hijabs and Islamic clothing for women; and the Al Rouche supermarket. Even the Beaulaze beauty parlour shopfront was bedecked in Arabic calligraphy, although notably the garish pink-fronted Beit Alwared (House of Flowers) only had English on its shopfront. Further down the road was the Dubai shawarma grill and the Al-Mahdi supermarket, again with large Arabic writing on its front. London, of course, has always been a city of migration. Much of my own family arrived here more than a century ago from Russia, fleeing Tsarist terror and pogroms. I understand that modern urban life is always in a state of flux. Cities and streets, like Kilburn High Road, adapt and evolve. I was reminded of the cricket bat philosopher's paradox. When the handle is replaced and then the blade, is it still the same cricket bat? Was I still in London or an imagined version of somewhere in the Middle East? The old shops of Kilburn High Road had clearly been replaced, but in the same buildings which still stood, now bedecked in Arabic calligraphy. I could only trust my instincts—and the evidence in front of me. The High Road of my youth, and even my twenties and thirties, was clearly long gone, unlikely to ever return. Now at least I understood the meaning of '*unheimlich*'—the feeling, the moment when a once-familiar place finally becomes something else, unfamiliar and unsettling.

Wir Schaffen Das Nicht: Europe is Paying the Price

Wir schaffen das, We can do it, said Angela Merkel that fateful summer of 2015. Merkel was wrong and Europe continues to pay the price for her mistake. The reality of the new Europe, from child assassins in Sweden, no-go areas in Berlin for Jews and gays, the rise in crime and gang-rapes, the surrender of central London to those screaming for the destruction of Israel, the explosion in anti-Semitism, the remodelling, or colonization, of our city high streets, all these show that we—or western Europe—cannot do it.

I returned to Keleti recently. The station and its surroundings have weathered the migration crisis better than Kilburn High Road. There is nothing there to indicate that the terminus was, just a decade ago, the centre of the world's attention. The nooks and alleys of the station complex that were once temporary home to thousands of people are once again clean and orderly. The small plaza where I watched teenage boys play football while their elders drank coffee and wondered what fate held in store is now quiet and empty. So too are the small glass-fronted side rooms where volunteers handed out food and doctors provided rudimentary medical care to the migrants. Commuters and schoolchildren no longer pick a wary path through lines of burly police officers or legions of sleeping migrants. The 2015 migrant crisis reshaped Europe forever. But Hungary, at least, is safe and at peace.

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