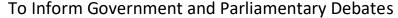
SOAS ICOP Policy Briefings





Racist and anti-immigrant violence: how can it be prevented? by Dr Ben Whitham, SOAS University of London (19th August 2024)

Serious racist and anti-immigrant violence spread across England and Northern Ireland in late July and early August 2024. This included attempts to burn hotels housing asylum seekers, attacks on mosques, and many attacks on the homes, businesses, and bodies of racially minoritised people. While social media misinformation spread by far-right agitators undoubtedly played a key role, parliamentary and news media rhetoric also bears some responsibility for this violence. This makes legislative solutions like the Online Safety Act inadequate to prevent such violence.

In recent years, small-boat migration across the English Channel has been the subject of increasingly intense <u>media</u> and parliamentary scrutiny. Hansard-recorded parliamentary references to small boats increased from 21 in 2019 to 630 in 2023 (a 2900% increase over four years). **There was a 110%** increase in parliamentary references to small boats from 2022 to 2023 alone, <u>despite a 37% decrease</u> in people making the journey across the Channel in the same period.

<u>Politicians and media</u> have fixated on a national '<u>small boats crisis</u>', '<u>small boats nightmare</u>' and '<u>the small boats problem</u>'. The previous government made '<u>stop the boats</u>' its slogan and most prominent policy pledge: it was displayed on the prime minister's lecterns during official addresses to the public and was subsequently chanted and displayed on banners during the recent violence. This has created a national sense that this is the most urgent political issue of our time, and that migrants landing on the south coast represent an existential crisis and a threat to the UK's 'way of life'.

Parliamentarians and media have contributed to the tone of denigration and dehumanisation of small-boat migrants. While <u>earlier dehumanising political and media narratives</u> referred to a '<u>swarm of migrants</u>' and portrayed them as '<u>cockroaches</u>', more recent debate has framed small-boat migrants as deceitful, <u>'illegal' or 'criminal' invaders who</u> threaten national security and identity. Some parliamentarians allege the presence of '<u>murderers and rapists</u>' among those arriving on the south coast; other interventions focus on alleged deceit around age, family membership, and asylum need.

There has been a particular focus in both <u>media</u> and <u>parliamentary debate</u> on the use of hotel accommodation to house asylum seekers in this context. Despite extensive <u>evidence to the contrary</u>, <u>politicians</u> and journalists have implied that this means small-boat migrants and asylum seekers are living a life of <u>excessive luxury</u> in the UK, exploiting British generosity in a period of scarcity.

The fact that many people crossing the Channel by small boat in recent years come from majority-Muslim countries has been exploited in <u>political debate</u>, fuelling already <u>well-established Islamophobic anxieties</u> about Muslim migration being part of a racial population 'replacement'. This angst is a popular white supremacist conspiracy theory, which has been <u>cited by far-right terrorists carrying out Islamophobic massacres</u>. Yet, alongside its twin Islamophobic anxiety of all Muslims being potential terrorists, it feeds the <u>racist fantasy of a 'Muslim Problem' in the UK</u>.

To reduce the likelihood of continued far-right violence targeting people perceived to be migrants or Muslims (including racially minoritised people in general) and asylum seekers in hotels, parliamentarians should re-assess the language used around small-boat migration, the centrality of this issue to our national politics, and the adequacy of media regulation.

To find <u>more humane policy solutions</u> to dangerous channel crossings, asylum backlogs and hotel accommodation, and the prevalence of Islamophobic and anti-migrant narratives, government should urgently convene and consult people with <u>pertinent expertise</u> and <u>lived experience</u>.

For further information, contact the author at bw70@soas.ac.uk. Contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann for access to other experts at as150@soas.ac.uk, and visit our website for more information. The views expressed in SOAS ICOP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS University of London.