# Liam Óg Ó hAnnaidh’s terrorism charge sparks fierce UK debate on artistic freedom and political expression



The recent legal troubles of Liam Óg Ó hAnnaidh, known as Mo Chara, a member of the Irish rap trio Kneecap, have ignited a firestorm of debate surrounding free expression and artistic integrity in the UK. Charged under the UK's Terrorism Act for allegedly displaying a Hezbollah flag during a concert in London, Ó hAnnaidh's case stands as a potent symbol of the tensions between political expression and state power. Supporters argue that his arrest reflects a wider issue of systemic censorship targeting artists who challenge the status quo.

Kneecap, hailing from Belfast, has long been recognised not just for its music, but for its provocative lyrics that often tackle themes of Irish identity and resistance against colonialism. This latest incident traces back to a performance on November 21, 2024, where videos emerged purportedly showing the band expressing support for banned groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas. Critics have been quick to label their actions as dangerously inflammatory. British Interior Minister Yvette Cooper condemned remarks made by Mo Chara, calling them reckless and indicative of a troubling trend among certain performers. However, Kneecap has firmly denied the accusations, asserting that their statements have been misrepresented, aimed more at critiquing political injustices rather than endorsing violence.

The band's controversial messages have not been limited to a single incident. Mo Chara faced public backlash after a prior performance where he stated, "The only good Tory is a dead Tory," and encouraged the audience to “kill your local MP.” Such comments drew outrage from various political figures, leading to further scrutiny of Kneecap's artistic output. The group has since issued apologies to the families of murdered British lawmakers Jo Cox and David Amess, acknowledging the sensitivity of their statements in light of the UK’s fraught history of political violence. Nevertheless, they maintain that their art is intended as commentary, rather than incitement.

The investigation into Kneecap also follows their performances at high-profile festivals, such as Coachella, where the group displayed messages in support of Palestinian rights while facing accusations of promoting hate speech. Notably, criticisms were levied against them from public figures, including Sharon Osbourne, who demanded that their international performance privileges be revoked. This backlash highlights a growing divide within the political dialogue surrounding artistic expression, especially when it intersects with contentious geopolitical discussions.

Kneecap’s performances are often viewed through the lens of a broader Irish artistic tradition, known for its rebellious spirit and political commentary, reminiscent of influential figures like Christy Moore and Sinead O’Connor. Irish art has long served as a vehicle for social and political critique, making the current charges against Mo Chara appear not just as legal challenges, but as attempts to silence a voice rooted in a rich tradition of resistance and rebellion. As Kneecap’s manager, Daniel Lambert, stated, the band represents a new wave of working-class artists willing to confront the injustices they see around them, despite potential harm to their careers.

As the case unfolds, it remains to be seen whether the charges against Ó hAnnaidh will resonate beyond the immediate legal implications. Advocates for artistic freedom argue that such actions only amplify the voices being silenced, signalling to young artists that their words have the power to inspire significant societal reflection. Critics of the British establishment contend that the treatment of Kneecap showcases a fundamental fear of dissent—a fear that, according to this narrative, could eventually backfire, driving a more persistent and determined push for artistic and political expression among the younger generation.

Ultimately, the response from the British establishment may well determine the future narrative around not only Kneecap, but the broader discourse on artistic freedom. With a court appearance set for June 18, the music world will be watching closely, as the implications of this case could extend far beyond a singular performance, touching on the very fabric of free speech in contemporary society. As the song of dissent continues, it challenges not merely the legalities of artistic expression, but the societal structures that shape our understanding of free speech and protest.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2060308/kneecap-row-kemi-badenoch), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/951643fa3345a152f86b59bbdcbd0a49)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/951643fa3345a152f86b59bbdcbd0a49), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/b88745d2-d29b-4613-8632-fa763eb4f924), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/irish-band-kneecap-say-terrorism-charge-seeks-silence-artists-2025-05-22/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/irish-rappers-kneecap-apologise-families-murdered-uk-lawmakers-2025-04-29/), [[6]](https://apnews.com/article/3cc86cf249c366554dee3cf5dd498fdc)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/b88745d2-d29b-4613-8632-fa763eb4f924), [[6]](https://apnews.com/article/3cc86cf249c366554dee3cf5dd498fdc)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2060308/kneecap-row-kemi-badenoch), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/irish-band-kneecap-say-terrorism-charge-seeks-silence-artists-2025-05-22/), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/irish-rappers-kneecap-apologise-families-murdered-uk-lawmakers-2025-04-29/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2060308/kneecap-row-kemi-badenoch), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/irish-band-kneecap-say-terrorism-charge-seeks-silence-artists-2025-05-22/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/951643fa3345a152f86b59bbdcbd0a49), [[6]](https://apnews.com/article/3cc86cf249c366554dee3cf5dd498fdc)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2060308/kneecap-row-kemi-badenoch> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/951643fa3345a152f86b59bbdcbd0a49> - Liam Óg Ó hAnnaidh, known as Mo Chara, a member of the Irish hip-hop group Kneecap, has been charged under the UK's Terrorism Act for allegedly displaying a Hezbollah flag during a performance at London's Kentish Town Forum on November 21, 2024. The charge follows an investigation into videos showing the band endorsing Hezbollah and Hamas and inciting violence against lawmakers. Kneecap denies these allegations, claiming their remarks were misrepresented by political figures. The group, based in Belfast, is recognised for promoting Irish-language culture but is controversial for its provocative lyrics and political stances. The controversy has led to several concert cancellations and calls from politicians to drop the band from events, including the upcoming Glastonbury Festival. Ó hAnnaidh is scheduled to appear in court on June 18, and police continue to investigate footage from a separate 2023 concert.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/b88745d2-d29b-4613-8632-fa763eb4f924> - Liam Óg Ó hAnnaidh, known by his stage name Mo Chara and a member of the Belfast-based Irish-language rap trio Kneecap, has been charged with a terrorism offence under the UK's Terrorism Act 2000. The charge pertains to allegedly displaying a Hezbollah flag during a concert at London's O2 Forum in November 2024, an act believed to suggest support for a proscribed organisation. Ó hAnnaidh is scheduled to appear at Westminster Magistrates' Court on June 18. If convicted, he faces up to six months in prison and/or a fine. Kneecap has rejected the allegations, calling the charges a political distraction and an attempt to silence artists critical of global injustices, particularly in Gaza. They emphasised their condemnation of all attacks on civilians and denied support for Hamas or Hezbollah. The group's performances, including a recent appearance at Coachella, have drawn attention for their political stance and symbolism rooted in Irish Republican sentiments. The charge follows an investigation by the Metropolitan Police’s Counter Terrorism Command using audience-filmed footage.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/irish-band-kneecap-say-terrorism-charge-seeks-silence-artists-2025-05-22/> - Irish-language rap group Kneecap has condemned a terrorism-related charge against band member Liam O'Hanna as an attempt to silence politically outspoken artists. O'Hanna, 27, was charged by London's Metropolitan Police for allegedly displaying a Hezbollah flag—representing the Iran-backed militant group banned in the UK—during a performance in November. Kneecap stated the flag was thrown on stage and denied endorsing Hezbollah or Hamas, emphasising their condemnation of all attacks on civilians. The band, known for advocating Irish identity and Irish unity, has been scrutinised recently for pro-Palestinian messaging during their Coachella performance. In April, they also apologised for previously controversial comments perceived as encouraging violence against MPs. O'Hanna is scheduled to appear in court on June 18. Despite mounting criticism, including calls from UK lawmakers for their exclusion, Kneecap is still set to perform at the Glastonbury Festival in June.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/irish-rappers-kneecap-apologise-families-murdered-uk-lawmakers-2025-04-29/> - Irish rap group Kneecap issued an apology to the families of murdered British lawmakers Jo Cox and David Amess following the resurfacing of controversial footage from their 2023 performance, where a member appeared to say, "Kill your local MP" and "The only good Tory is a dead Tory." The band, known for their republican views and support for Irish unity, has also been criticised for pro-Palestinian messages at events, including a Coachella performance condemning Israel and footage supporting banned groups Hamas and Hezbollah. Kneecap denied supporting any militant groups, stating the clips are part of a smear campaign and reiterating their condemnation of attacks on civilians. British Interior Minister Yvette Cooper condemned the comments as dangerous, noting law enforcement is reviewing the footage. Kneecap, set to perform at Glastonbury Festival in June, emphasised they did not intend to cause harm and acknowledged the gravity of their statements amid the UK's history of political violence.
6. <https://apnews.com/article/3cc86cf249c366554dee3cf5dd498fdc> - British counterterrorism police are investigating the Irish hip-hop group Kneecap following controversial comments made during concerts. In 2024, a band member allegedly said, "The only good Tory is a dead Tory. Kill your local MP," and in 2023, shouted "up Hamas, up Hezbollah," referencing groups banned in the U.K. The Metropolitan Police confirmed there are grounds for further inquiry, now led by its Counter Terrorism Command. Kneecap, known for combining satirical songs with Irish republican symbolism, has ignited political tensions and public debate, especially after projecting anti-Israel messages during a Coachella performance. The group apologised to the families of U.K. MPs Jo Cox and David Amess, who were murdered in separate extremist attacks, claiming their comments were taken out of context. Some U.K. lawmakers have called for Kneecap to be removed from upcoming festivals, though notable musicians have defended them, criticising attempts to silence the group and uphold artistic freedom. Kneecap’s recent rise to international attention follows the success of their semi-autobiographical film "Kneecap," which screened at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival and received Oscar shortlist recognition.
7. <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/politics/video-anti-terror-police-investigating-after-member-of-kneecap-screams-up-hamas-and-hezbollah-while-draped-in-assault-rifle-flag-5096575> - Anti-terror police are investigating a video of a Belfast rapper declaring "up Hamas, up Hezbollah" while draped in the latter's flag. The Met told the News Letter that the matter had been passed to a unit within The Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command for examination. The rapper in question is Mo Chara, a member of the republican trio Kneecap. Videos of the occurrence were filmed at a gig in London last November and posted online. Kneecap performing in London, November 21, 2024 (and inset the flag of Hezbollah) They have come to wider attention now following controversy around Kneecap's performance at the Coachella music festival in California at the weekend. At that festival, the rappers displayed the message "f\*\*k Israel, free Palestine" on a giant screen behind them. This prompted former X-Factor judge Sharon Osbourne, who is part Jewish, to accuse the band of "hate speech" and demand that the group's visas for touring America are revoked. Following the weekend's Coachella performance, video and images of the group's gig at Kentish Town Forum, London last November 21 were then circulated on Twitter by a member of the Jewish group the Community Security Trust (CST). These were culled from original video footage that was posted online by the small YouTube channel '31 Seconds of thereabouts', showing Mo Chara draped in the yellow flag of Hezbollah. More footage of the same gig, posted by the YouTube channel 'Big Sharpie', also shows the Hezbollah flag draped over Mo Chara, and also captures him saying to the crowd: "Free the six counties, tiochfaidh ar la, up Hamas, up Hezbollah!" The CST has told the News Letter in a statement: "Hizbollah is a dangerous terrorist organisation with a long record of violence and terror, both targeting Jews around the world and in Syria during the civil war. It is utterly disgraceful for them to be lauded from a London stage, with the whole crowd encouraged to show their support. We fully expect the police to investigate this thoroughly and take appropriate action." A Met Police spokesperson said: "We have been made aware of the video today (22 April) and it has been referred to the Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit for assessment and to determine whether any further police investigation may be required." Both Hezbollah (which the UK government officially spells 'Hizballah’) and Hamas are proscribed under the UK’s Terrorism Act 2000. Hezbollah is based in Lebanon, and means 'party of God' in Arabic. The UK government, in a statement about its proscription, says that it "has won votes in legitimate elections". Amid escalating controversy following their Coachella gig, the News Letter contacted Kneecap manager (and former Irish diplomat) Dan Lambert. He said: "There’s journalism and then there’s the News Letter Belfast. Nobody from Kneecap will be providing comment to your 'paper’, ever. Free Palestine!" He added: "Hasta la victoria siempre." This was the "same reply as always", he said. Previous approaches for comment have met with similar responses. It was reported today that the Irish rappers posted to X and referred to "hundreds of violent Zionist threats". In an interview on RTE Radio, the musicians’ manager Daniel Lambert confirmed the band had received death threats, and that the nature of the threats would be "too severe" to outline on air. "I think that, to the band’s massive credit, there’s three working-class young people here who’ve built a career for themselves on the basis of the Irish language and music and culture and identity," Mr Lambert said. "They have the bravery and the conviction – especially given where they’ve come from in post-conflict society – to stand up for what’s right, and are willing to do that despite the fact that it may harm their career, despite the fact that it may harm their income, and they should be praised massively for that. "It’s an extremely strong position for young people to take, especially young people from a working-class background."