# Middle Eastern restaurant in Ealing exposed as hub for hawala money laundering aiding migrant smuggling



In the heart of an affluent London suburb, a seemingly ordinary Middle Eastern restaurant in Ealing has been exposed as a front for a sophisticated money laundering network aiding migrant smuggling operations. Pavel Vinto, the 36-year-old owner, was filmed by an undercover reporter revealing how his establishment launders cash for people traffickers operating between the UK and northern France. This clandestine banking system, known as "hawala," facilitates transactions involving hundreds of millions of pounds annually, enabling record numbers of migrants to cross the Channel illegally. Despite public commitments by political leaders to disrupt these criminal networks, Vinto’s operation thrives openly, casting doubt on the effectiveness of current enforcement measures.

The hawala system operates as an informal money transfer mechanism largely untraceable by authorities. Money handed over in one country is settled by corresponding payments in another, often with brokers holding funds as "insurance" until migrants have safely arrived. This method shields migrants and traffickers alike from scams and investigations, allowing funds to be moved without physical cash transfers. Vinto described how payments totaling £7,500 for five migrants would remain with him until confirmation of safe arrival in the UK, after which he would remit the money to contacts in France, taking a fee for the service. The National Crime Agency (NCA) has identified similar businesses—including restaurants, car washes, and carpet shops—acting as conduits for this underground economy.

The case of Vinto parallels other recent convictions illustrating the hawala network's role in people smuggling. An Iranian carpet shop owner in London was jailed after evidence linked him to a money laundering scheme facilitating Iranian migrants' Channel crossings. Similarly, a car wash franchise in Wales served as the base for a smuggling ring moving thousands from the Middle East through Europe into the UK, offering multiple tiers of smuggling services from foot travel to flights. These examples highlight the extensive and embedded nature of illicit money flows underpinning migrant smuggling, involving brokers trusted by organised crime groups to handle significant sums, often running into millions of pounds.

The economic ties extend beyond UK borders, with investigations tracing smuggling networks back to regions such as Kurdistan, where entire local economies are intertwined with the trade. The NCA has focused on disrupting these financial channels, warning registered hawaladars that involvement in organised immigration crime could lead to severe legal consequences. Despite these efforts and political promises promising to freeze the assets of facilitators, critics argue that small-scale yet profitable operations continue largely unhindered, as evidenced by Vinto's brazen activities in full view of police and local communities.

Government officials emphasise that illegal money laundering linked to people smuggling can lead to hefty prison sentences, while law enforcement agencies maintain a creditable number of active investigations targeting high-impact smuggling networks. The NCA’s strategy relies significantly on following the money trail to dismantle criminal enterprises facilitating dangerous Channel crossings, which have seen tragic fatalities in recent weeks. Yet the persistence of hawala-backed cash flows and the continued use of legitimate businesses to mask illegal transactions underscore the challenges facing authorities in curbing smuggling operations entrenched in everyday environments.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14878509/EXPOSED-boat-migrant-fixers-Britain-making-mockery-Starmers-claim-smashing-gangs-including-one-TikTok-plying-shameful-trade-west-London-restaurant.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14878509/EXPOSED-boat-migrant-fixers-Britain-making-mockery-Starmers-claim-smashing-gangs-including-one-TikTok-plying-shameful-trade-west-London-restaurant.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/nca-warning-over-money-laundering-linked-to-people-smuggling)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/uk-news/2024/01/18/london-carpet-shop-used-in-iranian-money-laundering-operation/), [[3]](https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uk-news/2024/11/22/people-smugglers-ran-three-tier-travel-service-for-middle-east-migrants/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://thenational.shorthandstories.com/kurdistan-people-smuggling-special-investigation/), [[5]](https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/nca-warning-over-money-laundering-linked-to-people-smuggling)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14878509/EXPOSED-boat-migrant-fixers-Britain-making-mockery-Starmers-claim-smashing-gangs-including-one-TikTok-plying-shameful-trade-west-London-restaurant.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/nca-warning-over-money-laundering-linked-to-people-smuggling)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14878509/EXPOSED-boat-migrant-fixers-Britain-making-mockery-Starmers-claim-smashing-gangs-including-one-TikTok-plying-shameful-trade-west-London-restaurant.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/uk-news/2024/01/18/london-carpet-shop-used-in-iranian-money-laundering-operation/> - An Iranian man, Asghar Gheshalghian, 48, was convicted for using his carpet business in London as a front for a money-laundering operation linked to small boat crossings. He acted as an intermediary, accepting payments from migrants or their families and releasing funds to criminal gangs after the migrants' journeys to the UK, charging a commission. Evidence showed links with at least eight Iranian migrants who later arrived in the UK by boat or lorry and claimed asylum. Gheshalghian also ran an unregistered money services business in North London, part of a network transferring money using the hawala system. His conviction follows that of Hewa Rahimpur, who smuggled 10,000 migrants across the English Channel in small boats, earning up to £260,000 per trip, and was sentenced to 11 years in a Belgian jail. The National Crime Agency (NCA) emphasized the priority of disrupting people-smuggling gangs by targeting their financial flows through agents like Gheshalghian. Investigators found a large amount of cash after his arrest, and financial investigators traced £1.6 million in payments into his bank accounts. NCA branch commander Mark Howes stated that Gheshalghian was trusted by organised crime gangs to handle their payments and launder the money made from organising dangerous Channel boat and lorry crossings, enabling their criminality and taking a cut from the profits. Crossing the Channel illegally in boats or lorries is extremely dangerous, and recent days and weeks have seen fatal consequences. Gheshalghian was found guilty of five counts of money laundering and facilitating illegal immigration after a two-week trial at Southwark Crown Court in London. He will be sentenced on January 24.
3. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uk-news/2024/11/22/people-smugglers-ran-three-tier-travel-service-for-middle-east-migrants/> - Two men, Dilshad Shamo, 41, and Ali Khdir, 40, both Kurdish, admitted to running a people-smuggling ring that facilitated the movement of thousands of migrants from Iraq, Iran, and Syria into Europe. Operating from a car wash in Caerphilly, Wales, they offered three tiers of service: the simplest being on foot or via HGV, the next by cargo ships or yachts, and the top tier by providing plane travel. Migrants paid thousands of euros per head for these services. The smuggling routes included Turkey, Belarus, Moldova, and Bosnia, ending in Italy, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Germany, and France, with many migrants continuing to the UK. Payments were made using informal 'hawala' money transfers through brokers based in Iraq and Istanbul. The National Crime Agency (NCA) described their operation as resembling a 'travel agent,' with migrants rating their service within that community. The NCA emphasized the importance of dismantling people-smuggling gangs by targeting their financial flows through agents like Shamo and Khdir. The pair pleaded guilty to charges related to their roles in the people-smuggling ring and will be sentenced at a later date.
4. <https://thenational.shorthandstories.com/kurdistan-people-smuggling-special-investigation/> - An investigation into the Kurdistan region's smuggling hotspot, Ranya, revealed that the town's economy heavily relies on people smuggling. The National's journey to Ranya was rooted in UK court documents from the trial of Shamo and Khdir, who had set up a business in South Wales. Investigators from the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) established that various money exchange addresses linked to Ranya were used for payments underpinning the trafficking trade. The investigation highlighted the town's deep involvement in the smuggling business, with the NCA focusing on disrupting financial flows linked to those facilitating people smuggling.
5. <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/nca-warning-over-money-laundering-linked-to-people-smuggling> - The National Crime Agency (NCA) issued a warning to registered Hawaladars in the UK about the consequences of being involved in organised immigration crime. While Hawala systems serve legitimate purposes, they are known to be exploited by criminals to move illicit cash, including funds from small boat people smuggling activities. The NCA, in coordination with HMRC, visited 44 businesses across the UK over two days to increase intelligence on financial flows linked to those facilitating people smuggling. Hawala is an informal value transfer system that operates without the actual movement of money, making it attractive for criminal activity.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8d4pl7lemyo> - A Russian mafia money-laundering gang operating in Spain was dismantled, with nine properties raided in cities across Spain and Lisbon, and more than €1 million in cash and cryptocurrencies seized. The gang processed up to €300,000 a day for various mafias, including Albanian, Serbian, Armenian, Chinese, Ukrainian, and Colombian groups. The investigation began in 2023 when police noticed systematic transfers of money belonging to foreign nationals in and out of Spain by known members of the Russian mafia. Europol stated that the scheme used the 'Hawala' method, allowing gangs to transfer money across countries without moving it physically or digitally between bank accounts.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgl79l2ep1o> - A smuggling ring that brought hundreds of people through Europe from the Middle East was operated by two men from a car wash, a court has heard. Dilshad Shamo, 41, and Ali Khdir, 40, are accused of unlawfully moving people from Iraq, Iran, and Syria to Europe in boats, lorries, and cars. The court heard the operation, between September 2022 and April 2023, was organised from the Fast Track Hand Car Wash in Caerphilly, owned and operated by the pair. Most of those trafficked came from Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and were charged money "equating to several thousands of pounds". The trial continues.