Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA

Episode One: The Best People Smuggler transcript

NARRATOR [00:00:00:00] I'm Richard Beanland, an officer with the National Crime Agency, and this is Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA. This podcast series unearths the murky world of dangerous criminals and the incredible work undertaken by the National Crime Agency to bring them to justice.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] Mr. Hasan Zada sat at the very top. He was the head of the OCG, a top people smuggler. There wasn't really much he couldn't offer people.

MARTIN CLARKE [] It is hugely, hugely dangerous to the migrant victims and the organised crime groups that are involved in smuggling these people don't care about the welfare of those individuals. We see that time and time again.

MONICA [] He'd made posts indicating that he was on like the 18th to 20th batch that year, and if we're saying 50 migrants approximately per crossing, obviously that is, that's a lot of people.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] The constant risk around people's lives is always there. But this is what the NCA does.

Surveillance Officer [] We also cover and provide protection and security for Spec Ops, Special Operations, which also includes Technical Officers. We're locking bad people up and we're making the world a slightly better place. I do get a bit of a buzz out of doing that.

Audio recording [] Police! Stay where you are!

Arresting Officer [] You're under arrest on suspicion of arranging and facilitating the illegal immigration into the United Kingdom, contrary to section 25 of the Immigration Act 1971.

MARTIN CLARKE [] Purely dealing with the UK arm alone wasn't going to dismantle and disrupt this crime group. We will reach out to our international network. We will reach out to international partners, pursue those individuals, bring them to the UK and put them in front of the courts.

NARRATOR [] This is the story of a people smuggler who ran an international network that moved migrants from his native Iraq into Europe, often ending up in the United Kingdom. You will hear how he used social media to advertise his services, and how the National Crime Agency used covert tactics and international collaboration to put him behind bars and disable his entire operation.

NARRATOR [] Episode 1: The Best People Smuggler

[Music]

NARRATOR [] It's 2021 and we're in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. [Music] A band of musicians has taken the stage and they're singing about the man who sat beside them, dressed in black and grinning as he showers them with cash. They call him 'the best smuggler, a first-class smuggler, a brave smuggler whose enemies fear him'. Before long, the man in black pulls out a handgun and begins firing rounds into the air, creating rapid audible pops to accompany his song. [music] But this isn't a folk song about a tobacco or alcohol smuggler. The man in black smuggles human beings, those who are willing to pay to make the long journey to mainland Europe and the UK. That man in black being feted as the best smuggler is Amanj Zaman, aka Amanj Hasan Zada, who is now based in the north west of England and his social media exploits, including this celebratory YouTube video, had put him firmly in the sights of the National Crime Agency.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] Mr. Hasan Zada sat at the very top. He was the head of the OCG. We're not certain of when the YouTube video was recorded. We found it very early on in the investigation, and it's obviously quite impactive. What was really useful for us is that it was under the name of Amanj Zaman, which was his criminal alias name. So his entire criminal network know him as Amanj Zaman. That's his business name, essentially. So it was great for us to attribute that to him, because then once we've got that, everything else falls in place.

NARRATOR [] The YouTube clip, which at the time of recording could still be found online, was one of many promotional videos Hasan Zada used as a core part of his people smuggling operation. The 34-year-old was a shrewd marketer who relied on social media to paint himself as a kind of folk hero, and not the mastermind of an international criminal organisation. The NCA launched an Operation codenamed 'Sheetful' and the Senior Investigating Officer, or SIO, tasked with the case was Alistair Mullen.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] His entire model was to get people from generally the Kurdish region of Iraq into Europe, clearly advertising criminal activity via Facebook, Tik Tok, Snapchat, all of them, saying that he was a people smuggler and he was the best. His reputation was, was prominent in the Kurdish community, in northern Iraq. Word of mouth was popular for him. It was anybody that would pay for his services. So Kurds were his primary, primary customer base. And then he did offer additional services to get them to wherever they wanted to go throughout Europe. And quite a few ended up in the UK. There was, say, 80 people on the RHIBs that they landed, only three of those migrants were his. So the ticket to get onto those RHIBs, which was coordinated by another smuggler, was basically his name. And it was all communicated between the smugglers via WhatsApp. His model was quite simple. He could run this international network from his living room, using one mobile phone with a Wi-Fi connection. All he did was advertise across social media saying that if you want to get smuggled into Europe, ring this number. And he charged about $10,000 per passenger to get into Europe.

NARRATOR [] Organised immigration crime, also known as people smuggling, is a chronic threat which puts countless lives at risk and undermines UK border security. The criminals behind these operations often give little thought to the dangers involved, only caring about how much money they can make. Here's NCA Branch Commander, Martin Clarke.

MARTIN CLARKE [] The crime groups involved in organised immigration crime, smuggle people across international borders and do so because they're preying on the vulnerability of these individuals that want to travel to a different country for their own individual reasons. But crime groups can see there's opportunity there. The organised criminals are often a network of individuals, whether it be across the UK or across Europe and further afield. It's all driven by money and therefore what we see is people being offered transport for between 5 and 12,000 pounds for individual migrant victims. Huge sums of money when you see, sadly on television, the likes of boats with 50, 60 migrants on board. If you imagine they're all paying

huge sums, tens of thousands of pounds. When you add all of that up, you're into the hundreds of thousands or indeed millions of pounds over a period of time. So the financial reward for this particular crime is significant.

ALISTAIR [] Certainly on the small boat crossings, they are inherently lethal. Overcrowded, cheap boats sailing the busiest shipping lane in the world. Disaster is inevitable.

MARTIN CLARKE [] We've seen over the last few years, and probably beyond that, the significant danger that people are put in, whether it be in HGVs and people might well recall the tragic incident in Essex, where a number of migrants lost their lives in the back of a refrigerated lorry, and then, similarly, in small boats, people again losing their lives, drowning or indeed being trampled to death again because of the desperation of people to try and make their way to the UK. It is hugely, hugely dangerous and risky to the migrant victims and the organised crime groups that are involved in smuggling these people don't care about the welfare of those individuals. We see that time and time again.

NARRATOR [] After discovering that Hassan Zada was a key player in an international network, Alistair quickly put a strategy in place to better understand his criminal enterprise and secure as much evidence as possible. But first we had to track him down.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] He was an illegal migrant himself. He entered the UK illegally and as such he there is a footprint for him in the UK, so we were able to confirm his location. We knew it was Preston but through a number of partners, they can tell us that he's paying council tax at this address. He was a top people smuggler. There wasn't really much he couldn't offer people. So I had to come up with a way of where we could gather the evidence. So we obtained authority so we can follow him. And we can do other tactics to collect evidence against him.

NARRATOR [] Those other tactics included our Special Operations team or SpecOps, carrying out covert intelligence gathering using technical equipment, which would prove critical to the case. More on that work later. But first, the team had traced Zada to a house in Stefano Road, Preston. And in 2023, our surveillance team was deployed. Here's one of our specialist officers who carried out that surveillance.

Surveillance Officer [] We received the task and we get the appropriate authorities through to make sure everything's legal and above board, briefed the team up and we went out and, and commenced doing surveillance. It was all intelligence led surveillance, so dependent on what we were told would be dependent on what days we would decide to go out and do the job. If I said it was hostile to law enforcement, I'll probably be underselling it. It's an area that is frequented by migrants, it's frequented by drug dealers. It's the middle of the prostitution area within Preston. So night-time activity particularly was, was quite active. It never seemed to die off at all. So that was in itself was a challenge because we obviously have to fit in. You need people who have the wherewithal when confronted by third parties, to be able to provide a cover story and satisfy the third party that they're not what we are, we're not law enforcement. You know, if you're sat in a van, you've got to convince them that you're, you're a builder. Most of the time, you use a various, one of several expletives and tell them to get lost, because that's what people would do. And it's all about having a reason to be in the environment that you're in. The way you dress, your attitude. Accents play a large part of it as well. All these things factor into each Surveillance Officer's sort of profile within a particular environment. If you get to the point where you're actually going to give a cover story and you're not just going to tell them to get lost, then my one's always, something along the lines of, yeah I've had a row with the wife, because, got a wedding ring on. So all those things ring true. It's all about being believable but not memorable.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] It's building blocks, so we start with, well, let's follow him, see who he's meeting. Expecting as normal, we would, that he would meet other co-accused potentially, who would become subjects of interest. We'd be able to identify his network. But in this particular case his network has all been overseas. It's just him and another co-accused in the UK and the rest were across Europe and into Iraq. So identify them and let's get a picture of them. Let's find out where they live. Identify what phones. How many phones? What is he, what is he using? Who's he meeting? What's he driving? To build an entire picture of, of this individual, how he's going about his daily life to commit this criminality.

Surveillance Officer [] So our objectives were to cover any meetings that that individual had to try and identify the individuals or get imagery of the individuals that Zada met. He very rarely came out the house, to be perfectly honest. So a lot of it centred around covering individuals visiting him at his home address as well as being able to, should they go off and go to a restaurant or go to a cafe or whatever, covering those meets as well. We then plot off around so that all escapes were covered by one of the officers. It tended to be all Asian males who were, were visiting, so the difficulty we had was differentiating between what we consider to be

criminal meetings and social meetings, which, to be perfectly honest, I found impossible to do, so what we tended to do was leave that to the case team to be able to, to go through and work out who was who, then ascribe roles to those individuals.

NARRATOR [] Because Zada conducted most of his business from within his own home, investigators resorted to those other covert tactics we referred to earlier to help secure as much evidence as possible. To carry out the specialist work, our Technical Officers were called in and were supported by the surveillance crew, who were already familiar with the area, as Alastair explains.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] He rarely left the house and if he did, he didn't really travel too far, didn't have his own car. He ran this network through his phone. He didn't go off and meet other people. He didn't need to go and have secret clandestine meetings in a cafe or in a pub. It was all just done from his phone in his living room. If we're not identifying and meeting with other criminals and evidencing what they're talking about, we needed to think a little bit more outside the box of how we were going to collect the evidence and the intelligence that disrupted him. We were able to deploy some covert audio collection for evidence and intelligence gathering.

Surveillance Officer [] We also cover and provide protection and security for Spec Ops, Special Operations, which also includes Technical Officers. They provided the equipment that obtained that material. And what we do is, as and when they wish to deploy, we go forward and we put a cordon on and we then control and we detect when it's safe to go forward, time it so that we could get them to get to the location that they needed to be at to do their work. We then provide a cordon for that entire process, and then once they were content that they'd done what they needed to do, they shouted up. We check and we say, right, okay, you can extract and we'll extract them out. And we literally led them in and let them out.

NARRATOR [] These covert tactics would prove central to the investigation, as they enabled us to hear recorded conversations when Zada met with his criminal associates, providing evidential material that would help the team build their case. The recordings, one of which you are about to hear, included the conversations about yachts, immigration camps and payments for passengers. On one recording, Zada was heard referring to himself as Amanj Zaman, his criminal alias that his associates used, and he describes how one migrant had reached ‘the other side’.

Surveillance Officer [] As I understand it, I think he was incessantly using his phone. From what I heard, literally one call would end, another call would start.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] It gave us a really clear picture of the network that he was operating, the volume that he was operating at and the structure of how he was running this criminal enterprise. He had people who had sort of specialist capabilities for him, people who were responsible for recruiting the migrants, so essentially a sales team on the ground. He had people who were running the social media networks for him. He had oversight of what was put out there, but they were all posted from the KRI. So it was quite a sophisticated network that he was running. It was a, it was a strong business model that he had.

NARRATOR [] While building that picture of Zada's organisation, investigators were also trying to track down what was happening to the cash migrants were paying to be smuggled into Europe. Hawala is a type of informal money transfer system that relies on a network of trusted brokers. It is a popular method of banking in the KRI. Zada relied on this system to manage his money, but this created complications for the Sheetful team.

ALAISTAIR MULLEN [] So we had a financial strategy that was running throughout the investigation, but it was difficult because as a crime group, they didn't utilize traditional banking methods. The banking footprint in the Kurdish region of Iraq is very small. They all use a Hawala network where there is no access to records. We can't request them via production orders or anything like that. It's based on trust, so obviously they're not going to be particularly forthcoming with law enforcement. He had a particular Hawala or a number of Hawalas he would use who were trusted. And migrants were directed to pay the money for the crossings into those Hawalas and at a point where the money had been paid and everything was sorted, they would notify him and he would essentially release them to go on to their journey. So the money was, was a real challenge, but it was something that we constantly were trying to trying to unpick.

Surveillance Officer [] They think that being really clever by living in a small terraced house, driving around in a small Hyundai car, not particularly extravagant in any way, shape or form. On the face of it, they don't look like they're, you know, these big-time criminals with these lavish lifestyles and everything else. But that doesn't mean that they haven't got two, three million pounds stuck in a bank, waiting

for them to go and retire to. Doesn't mean they haven't got an estate back in Turkey waiting for them to go and retire to.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] As far as I believe, the money's never left Iraq. Whether that's been invested into land or property over there, and into his wider family, we can only speculate, but the money certainly has never been in the UK.

NARRATOR [] The advent of social media has been game changing for businesses, allowing them to broadcast their brand and messaging across the globe for free. Zada's business was no different. He cultivated an online image of himself as the best, a man who provides a reliable service, and he even had the customer reviews to prove it. Peppered across Facebook and TikTok were enticing posts featuring pictures of yachts and a phone number to call if users wanted to make inquiries. There were also video affirmations from satisfied customers saying Zada's name and thanking him for arranging their journeys. The video you are about to hear was shared on social media and shows a group of migrants praising Amanj Zaman as they sail across the sea on a crammed yacht. In the second clip, a large group of men can be seen posing for a video in which the cameraman says 'after three days on the road, they've made it to Macedonia thanks to Amanj Zaman'.

Video 1 []

Video 2 []

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] What he would do is, you would get a discount if you were to do a, a review, essentially. So if you were to say that you'd been, you had a great journey across the Mediterranean, then there was some benefit in that, in that for you. And then he would oversee the production essentially of these videos, making sure he was content with the graphics that were put over it.

NARRATOR [] While investigators on the ground were monitoring Zada's movements and conversations, intelligence officers back at NCA HQ were trawling social media platforms and recording proof of his online advertisements to help illustrate how his business worked. Monica is what's called an Open-source Specialist, an Intelligence Officer with expertise in scouring the internet for any publicly available information that could help the investigation.

MONICA [] There was, quite a large open-source element of it, with the main subject Amanj Hasan Zada and as the most experienced officer on my team with open-source, I ended up being tasked with taking that on. It's absolutely anything that's openly available on the internet. It can be, you know, libraries, etc. as well, however, generally for us it means anything openly available on the internet, social media, websites, it just means interrogating those and finding information that might be beneath the surface, not like obviously available as well. There was a few Facebook profiles which had already been identified as being associated with Hasan Zada. So the first thing I did was to have a look at those, see if I could see what he was up to, what sort of posts he was making, if I could identify any other accounts associated with him from that. The majority of his content, it was videos of migrants currently crossing. So they were usually from Turkey to Italy, and it would be videos of the migrants, celebrating their crossing, either like having got to the other side or on the yachts themselves, praising Hasan Zada, saying things like he's the, the lion of the sea or the king of the sea. For example, there was one where migrants were ripping up their passports after a successful crossing. That was the majority of the content.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] The social media material that we relied on was, was really important because it set the tone. It lays out exactly what he was doing, because you have the people that were smuggled saying that they've been smuggled by him. Obviously, we need a lot more to, to actually back that up. But it was really important to us because that was this entire business model, and we needed to show that, to say this is the level that he's operating at. He's not just, sort of one-man band. This is an organised crime group who are operating a very sophisticated and professional operation.

MONICA [] I think it was huge. Every single account he had, he had multiple across the time we were investigating him, but all of them had upwards of a thousand followers. I think at the start we had one that had closer to 10,000. They were all going likes, shares, loads of comments, just praising Hasan Zada. There were numbers quite often advertised for the migrants to contact him or his other facilitators on. That's how he was getting migrants basically.

NARRATOR [] Although we were able to find hundreds of posts linked to Zada's business, work had to be done to attribute them to the subject and to demonstrate that people smuggling offences advertised in the posts had actually taken place.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] There's a lot that needs to go on in the background. Advertising, as it stands, is not a criminal offense to do that, you need to prove that they are committing that offence. Then there's a lot of work that has to go into, to doing that, not to mention even the attribution of the pages. If somebody has a page in my name and posts something, well, that's not my responsibility, that, that is someone else doing that. So it makes it, it makes it difficult. But there is a lot of work going on. The NCA does work with all the, all the major social media companies to, to target and refine the method of targeting these adverts that are all over there and that's across all the platforms.

NARRATOR [] In 2021, the NCA launched a social media action plan, in partnership with major social media companies, and since then the Agency has identified and removed tens of thousands of posts, pages and accounts advertising the services of people smugglers. Meanwhile on Operation Sheetful, Monica was working hard going through Zada's online posts.

MONICA [] So we'd kind of do comms applications on the social media accounts and we'd find like which IP addresses had been accessing them. Sometimes they'd come back to being in Iraq when we knew that Hasan Zada was in Preston. So it wasn't necessarily he himself that was actually updating the accounts. I mean, it could have been, he could have been using a VPN, I don't know, but, his face was on the accounts. His name is on the accounts. He was the face of the operation, basically, even if he himself wasn't the person doing the posting. There's a lot of factors, and it needs to kind of go on over a lot of time for us to build up the evidence that it is, in fact, him. He is linked to these events before we can go and arrest him.

NARRATOR [] Officers worked round the clock building a case against Zada to help the Crown Prosecution Service bring charges that would reflect his level of offending. But in May 2024, covert monitoring revealed a conversation detailing plans that could put lives at risk. This meant our surveillance had to come to an end and we were forced to prepare for an arrest.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] I was aware that he'd organised a yacht that was going to set sail across the Mediterranean and leave Turkey, and we couldn't allow that to happen. So we needed to disrupt that best that we possibly could and arresting him was the only option that it came down to for me. So in a risk to life situation like that, obviously our obligations under ECHR take priority over absolutely everything that we do. There's a number of options that we could have done, all required

different elements to fall in line because the investigation was going well, but we needed to get over that evidential threshold. When we arrested him, we needed to be able to get a charge on him to get him remanded because, as I say, all he needed was a mobile phone with some 3G, 4G or 5G to, to be able to continue his criminal network. So the priority was disrupting that run. And if we could get him, then we tried.

NARRATOR [] Over the next 72 hours, we dedicated all our efforts to identifying the location of the yacht, working with international partners, while simultaneously ensuring we would present enough evidence to put Zada behind bars on arrest.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] I was acutely aware that this scenario would ultimately probably play out. So we did have a couple of options where we could have arrested him for the social media posts and then bail him, or we could have arrested him for something else. But once we had a full understanding of the way he operated, it was key that we managed to get him off the streets and build up a prosecution that that would safeguard all those people. There was a lot of international work that went on because if we could identify where that yacht was, then partners in Turkey would have been able to interdict that for us and safeguard those migrants, which would have been best case scenario for us. We worked with Italian partners to see what support they could offer. The case team were going over some of the material that we've had to try and find, anything really, that we could present to the CPS as an appropriate level of criminality, which we did, which was ultimately a number of migrants that have been smuggled on small boats into the UK under his direction.

NARRATOR [] Once they believed the evidence was in place that linked Zada to three crossings, Alistair and the team prepared to move in on the house in Preston and arrest Amanj Hasan Zada for people smuggling offenses in a dramatic dawn raid.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] You can have all the best laid plans in the world. We had a good understanding of his pattern of life at this point. As I say, we'd been doing surveillance on him. We knew generally what he did and where he would go. But on the morning of the planned arrest, for some reason, he was up and out early, going for a walk around the park we think. The stress did go up at that point.

Audio recording [] Police! Don't move! Police! Stay where you are!

Arresting Officer [] The time is now 8:36, okay. You're under arrest on suspicion of arranging and facilitating the illegal immigration into the United Kingdom, contrary to section 25 of the Immigration Act 1971. Okay, you do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] We used method of entry to get in so we could have the element of surprise. We went early in the morning. It's a, it is an exciting moment. It is something that you know, you want to get to with investigations. You don't always get to that point. For months of my life, I'd been investigating this individual, a lot of time and effort and money had gone into trying to disrupt him. But I think once we were in there and he was secure, we knew what we were going after, we knew we wanted to get hold of his mobile device. It is a bit of a weight lifted, but only temporarily, because then we're on a ticking clock of 24 hours to get what we need to do done.

Arresting Officer [] Okay, Amanj, where's your telephone?

AMANJ HASAN ZADA [] Sorry?

Arresting Officer [] Your telephone? Can you tell us where it is.

AMANJ HASAN ZADA [] Yeah.

Arresting Officer [] Where? Can you ask him where his telephone is please? Where is it? Where is it? Through there?

AMANJ HASAN ZADA [] Yeah, yeah.

Arresting Officer [] Just explain to him that this house is going to be searched. We're going to search this house. Do you understand that?

AHMADI [] What do you mean search?

Arresting Officer [] We're going to look around this house for, for items.

AHMADI [] Yeah, yeah, [Sorani]

ZADA: okay.

NARRATOR [] The arrest of Zada went smoothly and meant his network abandoned the smuggling attempt we had learned about through our covert recordings. What's more, the team were able to seize his phones, which would provide vital pieces in the jigsaw of his operation.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] We had specialist capabilities on the day. We had Digital Field Officers accompany us at the arrest because the plan was, if we can get into his phone, then we might be able to identify a location for this yacht because it was within 12 hours that it was going to set sail. So that was a priority for us getting hold of that phone and then trying to get into it. The migrants were safeguarded. We were able to get a rough location of where the migrants were being held and where the yacht was going to go from, but because of his arrest, that had the desired effect, where they called off that criminal run.

NARRATOR [] Meanwhile, work was ongoing to capture as much evidence from social media as possible.

MONICA [] So I'd start out by using, or like putting in his name and aliases, into Facebook. He actually, so he started out using Facebook more and then moved over to TikTok slowly. So I do it across both of them. It'd also be a case of, he used some particular hashtags quite often, so I'd monitor those hashtags. I think most of them translated to, you know, the actual country crossings, like say Turkey to Italy, he'd have flags, that sort of thing. His associates were also on social media, so I'd quite often check if any of those had, you know, linked to any new accounts or anything like that. Sometimes his old accounts would be friends with the new account. So I'd be monitoring his friends list for anything new. I remember there was a post he'd made where he was referring to each successful crossing as batches. There were multiple posts, actually across two Facebook accounts. He'd made posts indicating

that he was on like the 18th to 20th batch that year. And if we're saying 50 migrants approximately per crossing obviously that is, that's a lot of people.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] We seized three mobile devices from, from the address. It was, frustrating. He doesn't speak English, so everything on his phone was in Sorani Kurd, which put a big delay in additional time pressure. So once we had him charged, we only had 3 or 4 months to get everything in. And, and we knew a bulk of the evidence was going to be in that phone. But there's only so many people who speak Sorani Kurd that we can use to translate that. So we were almost drip fed eureka moments with it because it would have to be, we think this is relevant, can we get that translated? And then it would come back and you'd be like, oh, great, fantastic. And then carry on like that.

NARRATOR [] We were able to extract volumes of evidence from the phones and bit by bit, built an overwhelming case that demonstrated Zada was a prolific people smuggler. We linked the phones to Gmail and Facebook accounts behind his adverts on social media. Some of the numbers found in his device could be linked to those openly advertised online. We found travel tickets connecting him to migrants who had been smuggled into the UK, and messages that linked him to an immigration centre in the Czech Republic. Ultimately, Zada was charged with three specific channel crossings that he could be linked to through the material that had been seized, but it was likely he was responsible for many more.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] Although the entire job was looking at the Mediterranean crossings, which was his primary business, part of the package he offered was putting people on small boats in northern France and getting them across the UK. So they were the three charges essentially that we got. They were large dinghies, essentially. They were RHIBs. So they had a rigid hold inflatable boat, but they were just rubber boats like you see on the news, laden with people all sitting along the edge, feet in the water and, bearing in mind this is November, that is going to be freezing. It's just reckless. It was through surveillance evidence that we'd gathered, call data records, quite a lot of international evidence obtained via, via IROs, from partners in the Czech Republic and elsewhere, as well as material taken from his phone. And in addition, some of the evidence obtained through covert tactics, linked directly to the migrants who had been smuggled into the UK.

NARRATOR [] With Zada behind bars facing trial, our focus turned towards his criminal network overseas. Here's NCA Branch Commander Martin Clarke again.

MARTIN CLARKE [] The Senior Investigating Officer had a strategy that that went international in its reach out. The key elements of that included identifying through phone records and, and other investigative activity, links with individuals based in, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. We recognised at that point that purely dealing with the UK arm alone wasn't going to dismantle and disrupt this crime group.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] We engaged with the Iraqis quite early on because he was utilizing a Iraqi number which was using on WhatsApp here in the UK. So that was sort of the initial building blocks. But as the investigation went on and we identified that his entire network and his sort of lieutenants for use of a better word, were all based over there, to have a true, long lasting impact against this crime group, we needed to target those people as well. So throughout the length of the job, we worked with the Kurdish Regional Security Council and the Kurdish Regional Security Agency to target and disrupt those members of his crime group.

NARRATOR [] The NCA has a network of International Liaison Officers based all over the world. Our officer who covers Iraq facilitated the engagement with local law enforcement using relationships they had cultivated. Here's Colonel Salam from the Kurdistan Regional Security Agency who joined forces with the NCA on Operation Sheetful.

COLONEL SALAM [] Before this, Operation Sheetful, we did not have really the kinds of advanced communication and operations or cooperation with the NCA that we do now. So the relationship since then has grown, a lot, to date. And this type of crime is transnational. It starts in a country, in this case, with Operation Sheetful, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but ends in places like in the UK and other countries. So we find it is a very powerful relationship. The goal was to make sure that the networks are, nowhere to hide. And it was all intelligence information exchange between the two agencies.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] Myself and some colleagues travelled on a number of occasions to meet with partners to explore what options we could do. They are committed to tackling this as much as we are, and it was great to work with them. They ran their own investigation into the wider network, which resulted in the arrests in January 2025 of a number of people involved in that people smuggling enterprise.

MARTIN CLARKE [] This is the first time a team of investigators from the UK has visited Iraq and been able to, to participate in the planning and organising of, of a tactical response. And by that I mean planning of linked arrests.

COLONEL SALAM [] The arrests took place in different locations, some in cities, and the others were small areas around the vicinity of the cities. They're not trying hiding because they didn't know that they are wanted or arrested. The arrest is really disrupted the group of ability continuing operating in this country. So it was very important. Regarding this, the NCA role was really essential because they are providing us with detailed intelligence and help us tracked the group internationally. And, in other terms, coordinating, actions on their side with what we were doing here on the ground.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] One of them was a Hawala banker who we believe received funds from migrants on behalf of Zada, and the other two were smugglers who were facilitating and certainly post the arrest of Hasan Zada were a lot more involved in the crime group. The control that I had on that day was limited because it wasn't my investigation. We were there because we'd been working together throughout this. It was, it was fantastic to see them working the way that they did. And there are a number of factors over there that we don't have to really take into consideration like they do, around the security situation and what that looks like for them. I think we ended up going about five times so by the time you were there, you know how it works, we were well looked after.

MARTIN CLARKE [] It's always an exciting time when you move towards an arrest phase because a lot of the work and the culmination of potentially months and months of activity is approaching a really, really important sort of, crossroad in the investigation. So you want it to be successful. For the NCA as well, being part of something internationally was, was absolutely fantastic from my perspective. It was great to see that engagement and it was really brilliant to be on the ground. When the arrests were conducted, and individuals started to be discovered and brought in for questioning, you, you breathe a sigh of relief because you're ultimately you're pleased it's gone well, you're pleased everybody who was associated with it is safe, and you know that the investigation is going to be progressed and the wider group of individuals involved in organised immigration crime are ultimately going to face justice.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] It's a fantastic place, and the officers were incredible, dedicated people. The tactics and the tools that they've got is different. Culturally, it's a, it's a whole world away. But ultimately they, they wanted to achieve the same results as us. It was a bit of, we'll keep going with it and we'll see where we get, and then at the end, we'll have a look and see if we could have improved things. And off the back of those relationships, I'm sure we'll have many more good results come in from that partnership with them.

NARRATOR [] After his arrest, Zada made no comment in interview and later provided a written statement claiming his name was not Zada, that he only helped a few migrants out of goodwill and did nothing illegal. He said any reference to smuggling in the YouTube video or picked up by our surveillance, was actually referring to the smuggling of alcohol between Iran and Iraq. Zada entered not guilty pleas to all three charges, and in October 2024, his trial started at Preston Crown Court.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] Trials are difficult. This was a two-week trial. There was a lot of evidence put forward, quite technical bits of evidence around different sources, but pulled together to make one story. So the presentation of that was one of the more challenging elements. But after two weeks and two days of deliberations by the jury, they, they convicted him of three charges in the end, all linked to small boat crossings.

MARTIN CLARKE [] It was a fantastic phone call because, throughout the trial process, usually on a daily basis, myself and Alistair, the Senior Investigator would speak, he would update me around progress. And as with a lot of, a lot of trials in the Crown Court, it's a bit of a roller coaster, some days you're up, some days you're down. It was just a huge relief really, that a fantastic result came in. We got the result we wanted. More so, I was just really pleased for the investigation team because I can see the amount of hard work that goes into these investigations, you know, months and months of toiling and really, really hard work both in the UK and internationally. It's fantastic when that can happen. You know, the team can, afterwards can, can sit back and relax a little bit and start to think about the next one really.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] Glad I wasn't having my blood pressure taken at the time because as I say, two days were pacing up and down the front of the court, waiting on the jury to come back. And when, when they do, your heart rate goes up. What

will be will be. But then when they announced guilty to charge one, that was a big relief. And at that point, I was confident that the other two charges would be the same, just because they were so similar in nature.

NARRATOR [] On the same day he was found guilty, Zada was sentenced to 17 years in prison, with the judge acknowledging the lengths that NCA investigators had gone to, to demonstrate the extent of his offending.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] We needed a tangible event to, to pin his criminality to, so we needed something to happen. So yeah, it was it was quite frustrating because we knew he was moving hundreds of, if not thousands of migrants over his criminal career into Europe and across, across Europe. But we were fortunate that his level of offending was considered at sentence, and the aggravating factors that the judge took into consideration there was around the temperature and the weather conditions that these boats were put to sea and women and children were on these boats. The judge rejected that Mr. Hasan Zada was doing this for any kind of humanitarian reason, and it was done solely for financial gain. And also because the charges that he was convicted of ran from October to November in 2023, so this short time period was also a factor taken into consideration by the judges. 17 years is a great sentence.

MARTIN CLARKE [] I think that sends a message out to people smugglers, whether, whether they be in the UK or they're abroad. More sentences like this will continue to deter people from getting involved. It was fantastic that, that we were able to prosecute this individual and then seek to, to work with partners abroad because the NCA truly has that global reach and there is nowhere safe now for criminals, whether it be organised immigration criminals, or criminals involved in other activity, to reside and try and operate. We will reach out to our international network, we will reach out to international partners and ultimately will seek to pursue those individuals and put them in front of the courts.

NARRATOR [] Much of the criminality associated with organised immigration crime lies outside the UK, so the NCA works with partners around the globe to target those criminal networks that pose the highest risk and cause the greatest harm. At the time of recording, we have more than 100 live investigations into those individuals using all the powers at our disposal to disrupt their activity.

MARTIN CLARKE [] The NCA recognise organised immigration crime as a significant threat to the UK, and sometimes the people who are facilitating this and organising it are based abroad. Yet they're affecting the UK and their communities. So it's really, really important to the NCA that we counter this threat.

COLONEL SALAM [] We believe that no countries in the world can stand against types of these crimes alone. We know that human trafficking operates across borders and it's a transnational crime. And they exploited the gaps between even the jurisdictions and also even countries. Working together as agencies, sharing intelligence, planning together, all of these things, will make these gaps narrow and much harder for the smugglers and for those human traffickers to operate easily.

MARTIN CLARKE [] The NCA is well placed to deal with this because we are international in our reach. We've got International Liaison Officers, which are, NCA officers embedded around the world, and we now have really strong partnerships and collaborations with countries all over the globe. And that's where we have our niche capabilities, and we're able to address these international crime groups.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] It has been challenging this one. The constant risk around people's lives is, is always there. But this is what the NCA does. He was a prolific people smuggler. He's now in prison for 17 years. That has had a major impact on his criminal network.

Surveillance Officer [] The fact that we're locking bad people up and we're making the world a slightly better place, I do get a bit of a buzz out of, of doing that. It makes me feel good about being me.

MONICA [] Hearing that he got such a lengthy sentence felt like, you know, I've done my job. I've done it well.

COLONEL SALAM [] The NCA is a true partner in fighting human traffickers and smugglers as well. That's our mission, to protect life and to uphold the law of course.

ALISTAIR MULLEN [] I've been very lucky over the past 15 years to do a lot of really good investigations, been part of some really great work but this, is definitely up there. It's a worthwhile job. We're saving lives doing that.

MARTIN CLARKE []What's important in investigations is you never really stand still. You can't allow yourself to stagnate because as the crime type evolves, our law enforcement response has to evolve with that. So we never rest on our laurels, we'll always look to stay a step of the criminals and in this particular case, the criminals involved in organised immigration crime. We don't stop – we learn and we move on to the next one.

NARRATOR [] I'm Richard Beanland and you've been listening to Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to follow, rate and review so you can keep up with our podcast. You can learn more about the NCA by visiting our website at nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk. In the next episode.

[Preview of next episode]