Sikh Disinformation Lab

MISLEADING

Sunday Guardian frames US prosecutors' description of Pannun as contradicting India's terror designation

A 26 November 2026 Sunday Guardian report contrasts India's terrorist designation of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun with US prosecutors' description of him as an "attorney and political activist" in the Nikhil Gupta case. The Lab assesses the framing as Misleading: both descriptions are documented, but they belong to different legal systems and the contrast obscures an established murder-for-hire conspiracy.

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NARRATIVES
Labelling Sikh Individuals as Terrorists Without Evidence · Portraying Advocacy for Khalistan as Terrorism

OUR ASSESSMENT

The Sunday Guardian's November 26, 2026 report contrasts India's designation of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun as a terrorist with the description of him as an "attorney and political activist" in US prosecution records concerning Nikhil Gupta's assassination conspiracy. Although both descriptions are documented, the contrast requires an important legal distinction. India's designation originates from its domestic Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, while the US criminal proceedings concern the targeting of an American citizen because of his political activities. The American prosecutors' terminology is not a judicial review or reversal of India's designation.

The description of Pannun as a political activist was not newly introduced during the November 2026 sentencing proceedings. US prosecutors had used comparable language in earlier charging documents, including the 2024 indictment identifying Indian government employee Vikash Yadav as the alleged director of the conspiracy. Presenting this terminology as a noteworthy departure from India's designation risks obscuring the central issue: an established murder-for-hire conspiracy targeting a Sikh political activist on American soil.

The report includes extensive prosecution material concerning Yadav's alleged role, surveillance arrangements, payments, communications referencing Hardeep Singh Nijjar's assassination and discussions about additional targets. The significance of the prosecution's evidence extends far beyond the attempted assassination of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. In June 2023, Bhai Hardeep Singh Nijjar was assassinated outside a gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia. Within hours, according to US prosecutors, Vikash Yadav shared a video of Nijjar's body with Gupta. The following day, Gupta referred to Nijjar as another target, spoke of multiple targets and instructed that Pannun's assassination should no longer be delayed. Prosecutors also documented discussions about additional killings in Canada, the United States and other countries. These were not isolated references to political disagreements but evidence of an alleged wider operation targeting Sikh activists beyond India's borders. In October 2024, the RCMP publicly identified links between agents of the Government of India, homicides, violent criminal activity and organized-crime networks in Canada. In July 2026, American authorities further charged members of the India-based Bishnoi criminal network in connection with Nijjar's assassination.

The concerns extend beyond North America. In June 2023, British Sikh activist Bhai Avtar Singh Khanda died suddenly in Birmingham after reportedly receiving threats. His death was officially attributed to acute myeloid leukaemia, but his family subsequently raised concerns about the circumstances, and an independent forensic pathologist identified possible poisoning as a question requiring further examination. His death has not been established as a homicide, but the demands for scrutiny reflect the fears experienced by Sikh activists in the United Kingdom. In May 2023, Paramjit Singh Panjwar was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in Lahore, Pakistan, another killing whose perpetrators and motives must be established through evidence. These incidents, alongside documented assassination threats and surveillance of Sikh activists, demonstrate why the international context cannot be reduced to a disagreement over political terminology.

The central information-integrity concern is how the article places India's domestic terrorism designation at the forefront while treating the American prosecution's description of Pannun as a "political activist" as something remarkable. The more consequential story is that a Sikh political activist was targeted in a murder-for-hire conspiracy directed, according to US prosecutors, by an Indian government employee, while Canadian authorities were simultaneously investigating state-linked violence against Sikh communities. For Sikhs facing threats, intimidation and the possibility of violence across international borders, this is not an abstract debate about labels. It concerns the right to express political views, advocate for self-determination and live without fear of being targeted for those beliefs. By making the intended victim's political identity the central point of controversy,

the article risks diverting attention from the documented assassination conspiracy and the wider reality of transnational repression affecting Sikh communities.

THE CLAIM

India-designated terrorist Pannun described as 'political activist' by US prosecutors in Nikhil G upta case

THE ANALYSIS

What was published

On 26 November 2026, The Sunday Guardian published a report headlined "India-designated terrorist Pannun described as 'political activist' by US prosecutors in Nikhil Gupta case". The article places India's designation of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun under its domestic anti-terrorism legislation against the terminology used by American prosecutors investigating a conspiracy to assassinate him. Although the report reproduces substantial prosecution evidence concerning Nikhil Gupta, Indian government employee Vikash Yadav, Hardeep Singh Nijjar's assassination and discussions about additional targets, its headline foregrounds the identity of the intended victim rather than the gravity of the operation directed against him.

This framing is particularly consequential given the documented threats against Sikh political activists outside India. What the article presents as a noteworthy difference in terminology is, in fact, part of a much larger international controversy involving political assassination, alleged Indian intelligence involvement, organized criminal networks and transnational repression.

The verdict

The Lab assesses the report's central framing as **Misleading**.

India's Ministry of Home Affairs designated Pannun under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in July 2020. American prosecutors, meanwhile, have consistently identified him as an attorney and political activist targeted because of his political activities. These descriptions are not competing findings about whether the attempted assassination was justified. India's domestic designation carries no authority to sanction violence against a political critic on American soil, and US prosecutors were under no obligation to adopt the Indian government's characterization of the intended victim.

The distinction matters because **the central issue is not why American prosecutors called Pannun a political activist, but why an assassination conspiracy was organized against him in the first place**. The US Department of Justice has identified Vikash Yadav, an employee of the Indian government's Cabinet Secretariat, which houses the Research and Analysis Wing, as the alleged director of the operation. Gupta pleaded guilty to his participation in the conspiracy and received a sentence of 235 months in prison.

The article's emphasis on India's designation risks shifting scrutiny away from the alleged use of state-linked intelligence resources and hired killers against a Sikh political dissident. In a case involving an established

murder-for-hire conspiracy, presenting the victim's political identity as the principal controversy diminishes the significance of the violence directed against him.

Working through the claims

The report's assertion that Pannun **has been designated a terrorist by India** is assessed Misleading in its framing. The designation itself is a documented decision of the Indian government under domestic legislation, but presenting that classification as the principal reference point for understanding the attempted assassination gives an Indian government security label disproportionate authority over an American criminal proceeding. A domestic designation does not establish criminal responsibility in another jurisdiction, nor does it diminish the seriousness of an attempt to eliminate a political opponent through violence.

The assertion that **US prosecutors described Pannun as an "attorney and a political activist"** is True. The terminology appears in Department of Justice records, including the October 2024 indictment naming Vikash Yadav and the November 2026 sentencing announcement. It was therefore not a new or exceptional description introduced during Gupta's sentencing. The related assertion that **prosecutors described the conspiracy as an attempted political assassination** is also True. American investigators explicitly connected the targeting of Pannun to his political activities and criticism of the Indian government.

The assertion that the **US description conflicts with India's designation** is Misleading when presented as a legal contradiction. The two governments are not determining the same question. India's designation concerns its own national security legislation, whereas the American prosecution concerns a criminal conspiracy to kill a US citizen on American territory. A foreign government's designation does not override constitutional protections or create an exception to laws prohibiting political assassination. For the same reason, the assertion that **prosecutors argued Pannun was targeted because of his political ideology** is assessed Misleading only insofar as that established prosecution position is presented as controversial. The allegation of a political motive is central to the case, not an attempt to confer legitimacy on every position advocated by Pannun.

A substantial body of procedural and evidentiary assertions in the report is assessed True. These include Gupta's sentencing by Judge Victor Marrero to 235 months on 20 November 2026; his guilty plea on 13 February 2026 to murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire and conspiracy to commit money laundering; Yadav's alleged recruitment of Gupta in May 2023; Yadav's employment in India's Cabinet Secretariat; the alleged inducement involving a Gujarat Police case; and Gupta's statement that all identified targets would be attacked.

The documented operation involved Gupta approaching an individual cooperating with the Drug Enforcement Administration, who introduced him to an undercover officer posing as a contract killer. The prosecution described an agreed payment of $100,000, an earlier discussion involving $150,000, and the delivery of a $15,000 advance. It also documented the transmission of Pannun's residential address, telephone numbers and daily movements, surveillance photographs sent to Yadav, and discussions about using location-tracking technology. These were concrete elements of the murder-for-hire operation, not merely competing political claims about Sikh separatism.

The timing of the operation is equally significant. Prosecutors documented instructions to delay Pannun's killing during Narendra Modi's June 2023 official visit to the United States because of anticipated political repercussions. Following the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey on 18 June 2023, Yadav allegedly sent Gupta a video showing Nijjar's body. Gupta subsequently referred to Nijjar as another target, spoke of multiple targets and said there was no longer any reason to delay Pannun's killing. The prosecution also cited discussions concerning four operations to be completed before 29 June 2023, including three in Canada, along with instructions that other people accompanying Pannun could also be killed.

These details are particularly important because they place the attempted assassination within discussions extending beyond a single political activist or country. The report also accurately describes Gupta's concerns about potential FBI surveillance, the submission of seven audio recordings and transcripts, the contents of recordings from June 2023, and the prosecution's contested obstruction argument concerning an affidavit submitted in connection with a motion to suppress evidence. The July 2026 US indictment concerning the Bishnoi criminal network is likewise relevant because it separately alleges the involvement of Lawrence Bishnoi and Goldy Brar in Nijjar's killing, although it does not name Gupta or Yadav as defendants.

The article deserves credit for reporting much of this evidence. However, **the existence of extensive factual detail does not eliminate the framing problem when the headline directs attention toward the alleged inconsistency of calling the intended victim a political activist**. The more consequential evidence concerns the recruitment of a contract killer, surveillance of a Sikh political dissident, payments for his assassination, the alleged involvement of an Indian intelligence employee and communications referencing further targets across international borders.

Context

The significance of the Pannun conspiracy cannot be understood in isolation from the broader threats facing Sikh political activists abroad. On 18 June 2023, Hardeep Singh Nijjar was assassinated outside Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia. The following day, Gupta referred to Nijjar as another target and discussed accelerating Pannun's killing. These communications, documented by US prosecutors, directly connect the timing of the attempted assassination with Nijjar's death, although they do not establish responsibility for every killing discussed.

The concerns subsequently acquired a much broader official evidentiary foundation. On 14 October 2024, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police publicly reported links between agents of the Government of India, homicides, violent criminal activity, organized-crime networks and interference in Canadian democratic processes. The RCMP also disclosed that law enforcement had issued warnings concerning more than a dozen credible and imminent threats to life, specifically including members of the pro-Khalistan movement. These were not simply claims made by Sikh advocacy organizations; they were findings disclosed by Canada's national police service following criminal investigations.

In July 2026, American authorities unsealed indictments against members of India-based organized-crime networks. One indictment alleged that Lawrence Bishnoi and Goldy Brar ordered Nijjar's assassination. The allegations remain subject to criminal proceedings, but their significance lies in the fact that American investigators independently identified organized criminal structures allegedly involved in the killing of a Sikh political and religious leader in Canada. The Canadian and American investigations have therefore raised substantial questions about the use of criminal networks and cross-border violence against individuals associated with Sikh political advocacy.

Canadian intelligence reporting reinforces this context. In its 2025 public report, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service identified India as a source of foreign interference and documented the use of surveillance and coercive tactics to suppress criticism of the Indian government. CSIS also explicitly recognized that advocacy for Khalistan is lawful political activity in Canada. This distinction is fundamental: **a Sikh's political position does not remove their right to safety, freedom of expression or protection from foreign-state intimidation**.

Concerns about the safety of Sikh activists have also emerged beyond North America. In May 2023, Paramjit Singh Panjwar was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in Lahore, Pakistan. The following month, British Sikh activist Avtar Singh Khanda died suddenly in Birmingham. Khanda's death was officially attributed to acute myeloid leukaemia, but his family questioned the circumstances and sought further investigation. In July 2025, an independent forensic pathologist reported that the existing toxicology results could not completely exclude the possibility of poisoning. His death has not been established as a homicide, and responsibility for Panjwar's killing has not been conclusively established. Nevertheless, these incidents form part of the wider circumstances in which Sikh communities have raised serious concerns about the security of politically active members living outside India.

The United Kingdom has also faced documented concerns about threats against Sikh activists. Freedom House reported in 2025 that British police had provided protection to at least six Sikh individuals allegedly appearing on an Indian intelligence target list. These developments reinforce the importance of examining the international environment in which the Pannun and Nijjar cases arose, rather than reducing the discussion to disagreements about the terminology used to describe Sikh political figures.

The central information-integrity concern is that the report foregrounds India's domestic terrorism designation while the underlying prosecution documents a conspiracy to assassinate a Sikh political activist, allegedly directed by an Indian government employee. The distinction is not a minor editorial choice. The language used to introduce such cases influences whether readers understand them primarily as controversies about Sikh political legitimacy or as serious threats to the lives and rights of political dissidents.

The evidence presented by American prosecutors, the findings disclosed by Canadian authorities and the documented concerns of Sikh communities abroad establish that transnational repression is a substantive international security issue. Gupta's conviction demonstrates that the attempted assassination was not merely speculative. The alleged involvement of an Indian government employee, the communications surrounding Nijjar's killing and the documented threats against Sikh activists place the case within a wider environment of intimidation and political violence.

The question raised by the Sunday Guardian's framing should therefore be reversed. Why is the prosecution's description of Pannun as a political activist treated as remarkable, when the far more consequential finding is that a criminal conspiracy was organized to kill him for his political activities? India's domestic classification cannot be allowed to displace scrutiny of threats against Sikh political expression abroad. A credible account must place the assassination conspiracy, the evidence of state-linked threats and the rights of the targeted community at the centre of the story.

CLAIMS ASSESSED

01	Gurpatwant Singh Pannun has been designated a terrorist by India.	MISLEADING
02	US prosecutors described Gurpatwant Singh Pannun as a 'attorney and a political activist'.	TRUE
03	US prosecutors described the conspiracy as an attempted political assassination.	TRUE
04	The US description of Pannun as a political activist conflicts with India's terrorism designation.	MISLEADING
05	Prosecutors argued that Pannun was targeted because of his political ideology	MISLEADING
06	Judge Victor Marrero sentenced Gupta to 235 months on November 20, 2026.	TRUE
07	Vikash Yadav recruited Gupta in May 2023 to arrange Pannun's assassination.	TRUE
08	Yadav was employed by India's Cabinet Secretariat during the relevant period.	TRUE
09	Yadav offered to help Gupta resolve a criminal case involving Gujarat Police in exchange for arranging the assassination.	TRUE
10	Gupta responded that all identified targets would be attacked	TRUE
11	Gupta contacted someone he believed to be a criminal associate to arrange a hired killer.	TRUE
12	The purported contract killer was an undercover DEA officer.	TRUE
13	Yadav agreed to a payment of $100,000 for Pannun's assassination.	TRUE
14	An earlier offer of $150,000 was discussed, with the amount potentially increasing.	TRUE
15	Yadav supplied Gupta with Pannun's residential address, telephone numbers and daily-routine details.	TRUE
16	Gupta passed personal information to the undercover officer and provided surveillance updates to Yadav.	TRUE
17	The conspirators discussed using a GPS-enabled application to transmit surveillance information.	TRUE
18	Gupta instructed that the assassination should be delayed during Narendra Modi's June 2023 visit to the United States.	TRUE
19	Hardeep Singh Nijjar was assassinated in British Columbia on June 18, 2023.	TRUE

20	Yadav sent Gupta a video showing Nijjar's body after the killing.	TRUE
21	Gupta stated that Nijjar was also a target and that multiple targets existed.	TRUE
22	Gupta said there was no longer a need to delay Pannun's assassination after Nijjar's killing.	TRUE
23	Gupta discussed completing four operations before June 29, 2023: one in the United States and three in Canada.	TRUE
24	Gupta warned that the FBI might be monitoring the operation after Nijjar's assassination.	TRUE
25	Prosecutors submitted seven audio recordings and transcripts before sentencing.	TRUE
26	In a June 4 recording, Gupta confirmed that he wanted the target killed.	TRUE
27	June 19 and 20 recordings contained discussions concerning Nijjar, additional targets and surveillance.	TRUE
28	Gupta pleaded guilty on February 13, 2026, to murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire and conspiracy to commit money laundering.	TRUE
29	Prosecutors argued that Gupta made materially false statements in an affidavit supporting a motion to suppress evidence.	TRUE
30	A July 2026 US indictment concerning the Bishnoi organization included allegations about Nijjar's assassination but did not name Gupta or Yadav as defendants.	TRUE

SOURCES

01 https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/india-designated-terrorist-pannun-described-as-political-activist-by-us-prosecutors-in-nikhil-gu

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06 https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/international-crackdown-india-based-organized-crime-gangs-results-24-arrests-us-canada

07 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jul/02/sikh-activist-avtar-singh-khanda-pathologist-family-inquest

08 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/04/indian-police-accused-of-harassing-sikh-activist-in-uk-before-his-sudden-death

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10 https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/united-kingdom/2025

Sikh Disinformation Lab

About Sikh Disinformation Lab

Sikh Disinformation Lab is an independent, evidence-based programme founded and hosted by the World Sikh Organization of Canada. It monitors, analyses and publicly documents disinformation affecting Sikhs.

The Lab examines claims against evidence, publishes assessments with that evidence attached, and tracks coordinated campaigns over time. Every published assessment names what was claimed, where it appeared, what the review found, and what that assessment rests on. Where an item makes several distinct claims, each is assessed separately.

Assessments are made against the methodology framework in force at the time of publication. That framework is public, versioned, and reviewed at each phase gate; a material change produces a new version rather than a silent edit. The full method is published at sikhdisinfolab.ca/method.

Corrections are dated entries, never silent edits. Where a published assessment is found to be wrong or incomplete, the correction is recorded against it and listed at sikhdisinfolab.ca/corrections. If you believe something published here is inaccurate, write to the programme and it will be reviewed.

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