

British government admits links to Manchester and London terror attack groups

By Jean Shaoul
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The British government has admitted that it “likely” had contacts with two Islamist groups, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the 17 February Martyrs Brigade, for which the 2017 Manchester Arena bomber, Salman Abedi, and his father reportedly fought during the 2011 war in Libya.

Abedi killed 23 people in a suicide bomb attack as they were leaving the Manchester Arena concert last May.

A member of the 17 February Martyrs Brigade, an LIFG offshoot, Rachid Redouane was part of the terror group that killed eight people in the London Bridge/Borough market attack last year. He fought in the Libya war of 2011 for the Liwa al-Ummah unit.

The admission came as the British government, without a shred of evidence, continued to denounce the Russian government of Vladimir Putin for the supposed nerve gas attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia.

But there is now real evidence of Britain’s deep ties with terrorist groups that have killed many British citizens on British soil.

The US, UK and French governments provided air support in the NATO-led war to topple the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, while using Islamist groups as proxy forces on the ground.

Foreign Minister Alistair Burt, who was an under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office between 2010 and 2013—with responsibility for “Counter Terrorism, Counter Proliferation, Counter Piracy, North America, Middle East and North Africa, the Maldives and Sri Lanka”—told Parliament that “During the Libyan conflict in 2011 the British government was in communication with a wide range of Libyans involved in the conflict against the Gaddafi regime forces.”

He added, “It is likely that this included former members of Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and 17 February Martyrs Brigade, as part of our broad engagement during this time.”

His admission was contained in a written response to a parliamentary question submitted by Labour MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle. It was published after the start of the parliamentary Easter recess in a move that would ensure it got minimal attention.

Russell-Moyle said Burt’s response meant that the government had “serious questions” to answer over whether it facilitated Abedi’s travel to fight in Libya, backed Islamists linked to Al Qaeda in pursuit of its war aims in Libya, supported the Islamist militia that had radicalised a Briton who went on to kill 23 and injured many hundreds in Manchester, and whether the Arena bombing was “blowback.”

Conservative Security Minister Ben Wallace refused to say which groups the Abedi family fought for in Libya, stating, “The Home Office does not comment on intelligence matters nor on matters which form part of ongoing investigations.” This and his ambiguous reply to another question by Russell-Moyle provide a further indication of the nature of the links between the Abedis and the security services.

Within days of the Manchester and London attacks, the authorities were forced to admit that the perpetrators were known to the police, and that the UK’s MI5 intelligence agency had prior warning from the FBI that the Manchester suicide bomber planned a terrorist atrocity. In effect, MI5 gave him a free hand to launch a terrorist attack.

While Britain’s links with Libyan Islamist groups were widely suspected, this is the first time the government has admitted to having had contacts with them. It adds to the mounting evidence of the role of

British intelligence and successive governments in cultivating terror networks and protecting these “assets” as part of their regime-change operations in Libya and Syria.

In the 1990s, the British government allowed numerous Islamist groups to operate in London, to such an extent it became known as “Londonistan.” Libyan dissidents and the LIFG, formed out of a group whose members had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, were able to develop a base of logistical support and raise funds.

MI6 even used an LIFG agent in London to plot Gaddafi’s assassination in an attack that killed or injured several civilians, while leaving Gaddafi unhurt, according to a report by former British spy David Shayler subsequently confirmed by US intelligence.

All that changed in 2004, when the Labour government of Tony Blair brought Gaddafi in from the cold to secure lucrative contracts for British oil companies.

As part of the deal, the authorities designated the LIFG as a “terrorist” group, which sought to establish a “hard-line” Islamist state and “part of the wider Islamist extremist movement inspired by Al Qaeda.” They rounded up opponents of the Libyan regime, in Britain and overseas, including one of LIFG’s leaders, Abdel Hakim Belhaj, and his wife. Britain sent them back to Libya, as confirmed by documents belonging to Libya’s intelligence chief Moussa Koussa discovered after the fall of the Gaddafi regime.

Following a deal between Gaddafi and the LIFG in 2009, many of these Islamists were released from Libyan jails. LIFG was apparently disbanded and many of its members joined the 17 February Martyrs Brigade.

In another switch of foreign policy, Britain—as part of the NATO-led invasion of Libya in 2011—used LIFG’s successor organisations and similar forces linked to Al Qaeda as proxies to topple Gaddafi. But by this time, former Prime Minister David Cameron was telling Parliament that LIFG was longer linked to Al Qaeda.

According to reports published by the Middle East Eye website, which cited interviews with former rebel fighters, Cameron’s Conservative-led government effectively operated an “open door” policy. Prime Minister Theresa May was home secretary at the time when the security services allowed LIFG members to travel to Libya, providing them with passports and

giving them security clearance, as part of the military operations to overthrow Gaddafi. The Manchester bomber’s parents were both LIFG members.

These individuals, including Abedi, were able to travel freely back and forth “with no questions asked,” even though many had previously been under counterterrorism control orders, with tight restrictions on their movement and Internet activity.

May lifted the control orders when Britain joined US and French efforts to topple Gaddafi. This was because the UN resolution sanctioning the war on the Gaddafi regime specifically excluded ground troops, a restriction Britain later admitted it had covertly overridden.

The 17 February Martyrs Brigade and similar rebel groups were provided with \$400 million of weaponry by Qatar. Britain reportedly approved Qatar’s arms supplies, working closely alongside it as its principal partner in the war and helping covertly with their training. Such training was covert precisely because providing such “assistance to opposition forces” is illegal.

The same Islamist militias, along with large quantities of Libyan arms, were later shipped off to take part in the next US-sponsored regime-change operation in Syria, alongside offshoots of Al Qaeda.

The British government and security forces worked closely with these terrorist organisations in both Libya and Syria, and then allowed them to return “without hesitation,” thereby helping to spawn a layer of British-born jihadis such as Abedi.

Despite the publication of several articles about this relationship on Middle East Eye, none of the mainstream media have seen fit to comment on the government’s admission. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has likewise remained silent on the issue.

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