

Belhaj case lifts the veil on Britain's dirty wars for regime change: Part one

By Jean Shaoul
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This is the first of a two-part series.

Last month, the British government reached a deal with Libyan Islamist Abdel Hakim Belhaj and his wife Fatima Boudchar over its involvement in the couple's kidnapping in 2004. The couple were rendered and then tortured at the behest of former ruler Muammar Gaddafi.

In 2011, in a dramatic shift in foreign policy, Britain, along with the other NATO powers, went on to use Belhaj, his Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and similar jihadi groups in a military campaign, again in the guise of "humanitarian intervention," to engineer Gaddafi's overthrow.

Hailed as "revolutionaries" and backed by the NATO powers, these terrorist groups were part of the Western-backed Transitional National Council (TNC) that took power in Libya, capturing, lynching and sodomising Gaddafi. These groups soon fell out, precipitating a civil war that has torn the country apart.

The government agreed to pay \$650,000 to Boudchar—although Belhaj refused any compensation—with Prime Minister Theresa May issuing a formal apology. Her carefully worded statement did not admit liability, but was a tacit admission that Britain had colluded with the CIA and the Gaddafi regime in extraordinary rendition and torture.

Jack Straw, foreign secretary in Tony Blair's Labour government at the time of the rendition, was forced to backtrack on his former disclaimer of involvement, saying he had approved "some information to be shared with international partners" over the case but had "assumed" any connected actions would be lawful.

Blair refused to apologise or admit to any knowledge of the affair, saying, "I have gone along with what the government has done, which is to issue an apology. I didn't know myself about this case until after I left office, so I'm content to go along with that apology." The purpose of the deal was to prevent any further embarrassing disclosures about the government's collusion with Islamist forces at home and abroad, its deal with the Gaddafi regime to round up the UK's former Islamist allies and its subsequent collaboration with the same Islamists to overthrow Gaddafi and to attack the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

A review of the circumstances surrounding the case reveals

the sordid nature of British foreign policy in pursuit of its geostrategic and economic interests, including assistance to the US in its global system of abductions and secret prisons in which hundreds were tortured and "disappeared."

The out-of-court settlement came just days after a court ruling that the government must release papers surrounding the events within two weeks. It follows similar multimillion-pound payoffs to avoid incriminating evidence emerging in court cases involving nine British nationals and residents who were secretly rendered to Guantanamo Bay, as well as other victims of Britain's collusion with the CIA's extraordinary rendition program, including the rendition of other Libyan Islamists.

Belhaj's usefulness to British imperialism

Belhaj, who had close relations with Al Qaeda and later the Taliban in Afghanistan, was a founding member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Its aim was to overthrow the Gaddafi regime and establish an Islamic state.

Britain gave LIFG and other Libyan dissidents sanctuary in London in the 1990s, where they developed a base of logistical and financial support, and used them to mastermind Gaddafi's assassination in an attack that killed or injured several civilians while leaving Gaddafi unhurt. LIFG members were heavily involved in multiple armed conflicts, including in Afghanistan, Algeria and Chechnya.

This changed after Blair's infamous "deal in the desert" with Gaddafi that he said signalled a "new relationship." With Libya brought in from the cold, Blair secured oil and gas contracts for Shell and BP worth hundreds of millions of pounds. In return, he provided Gaddafi with military equipment and training for his troops in Britain, supposedly to safeguard Libya against extremist threats.

As part of the deal, Belhaj and his wife, along with other Libyan dissidents, were detained, rendered and tortured. Belhaj claimed that during his six years in a Libyan prison he was interrogated by US and British intelligence agents. His pregnant wife said she was chained to a wall for five days, then taped to a stretcher for the 17-hour flight to Libya where she was detained in prison until just before the delivery of her son, who was born weighing just four pounds. He and other Islamists were released from prison in 2010 under a deal with

Gaddafi that was brokered by Qatar.

In 2005, the Blair government banned LIFG and 14 other militant groups from operating in the UK, with membership of LIFG subject to a 10-year prison term. The group's assets were frozen. The US listed LIFG as a terrorist group until 2015.

In 2010, Gaddafi released Belhaj and other LIFG and rival Islamists in a deal brokered by Qatar.

In 2011, following the uprisings that overthrew the longstanding Washington-backed dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia, the NATO-led invasion of Libya to topple the Gaddafi regime used these "Islamist terrorists" as its proxies, including Belhaj's LIFG.

Britain's then-Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron played a major role in the NATO intervention, invoking the liberal imperialist "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine.

A parliamentary report in 2016 exposed the fraudulent basis of the war, criticising Cameron for claiming without evidence that Gaddafi was about to carry out a massacre of genocidal proportions against protesters in Benghazi. It castigated him for pursuing "an opportunistic policy of regime change," while telling Parliament in March 2011 that the intervention was not for regime change.

Just one month later, Cameron signed a joint letter with the French and US presidents declaring their aim was "a future without Gaddafi."

Theresa May was home secretary at the time the control orders were lifted, and the security services allowed LIFG members to travel to Libya, providing them with passports and security clearance. They were able to travel freely back and forth "with no questions asked," even though many had previously been under counterterrorism control orders.

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. They were provided with \$400 million of weaponry by Qatar, approved by Britain, which also helped covertly with their training.

Belhaj's LIFG and other jihadis joined the National Transitional Council (NTC), which constituted itself as Libya's government, with international backing, and played a significant role in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. The NTC, with the full backing of NATO, held power until August 2012 when the recently elected assembly took over. All this was despite Abdel-Hakim al-Hasidi, a leading member of LIFG, telling the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* in March 2011 that his fighters had links to Al Qaeda.

The LIFG transformed itself into the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC), with many of its leaders becoming members of the Tripoli Military Council (TMC). Belhaj became its commander after the rebels took over Tripoli and was appointed chief of security.

As LIFG's commander, Belhaj was, said CNN, "at the heart of Libya's revolution."

Belhaj went on to found the al-Watan Party, which won no seats in the 2012 elections. In 2014, Belhaj and other LIFG members backed Libya Dawn, a coalition of Islamist militias that briefly seized control of Tripoli and proclaimed their own government. Since then he has been living in Turkey where he has, according to the *Washington Post*, turned his revolutionary connections into vast wealth and influence, commuting regularly between Turkey and Libya where he is involved in the current round-table talks on "reconciliation."

While he holds no official position in government, militias loyal to him wield power in Tripoli. Last year, Saudi Arabia and three other Arab nations supporting the anti-Islamist factions in Libya, including CIA asset Khalifa Hifter, put him on a list of alleged terrorists backed by Qatar.

In 2012, these same Islamist militias were shipped off to take part in the next US-sponsored regime-change operation in Syria, alongside offshoots of Al Qaeda. A recent BBC Panorama program "Jihadis You Pay For," revealed that the funding of a multimillion-pound UK foreign aid project was being directed to jihadi opposition groups in Syria.

The British government and security forces worked closely with these organisations in Libya and Syria, and then allowed them to return "without hesitation," helping to spawn a layer of British-born jihadis who have carried out terrorist attacks in Britain.

Last April, the British government admitted in a written reply to an MP's question that it "likely" had contacts with two Islamist groups, the LIFG and the 17 February Martyrs Brigade, to which the alleged attackers of the 2017 Manchester Arena and the London Bridge/Borough market belonged, and whose families fought for during the 2011 war in Libya.

The admission adds to the mounting evidence of how British intelligence and successive governments cultivated terror networks and protected these "assets" as part of their regime-change operations.

To be continued

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