

UK government pays millions to tortured Libyan to conceal its crimes

Julie Hyland
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The British government has agreed to pay £2.23 million to Libyan Sami al-Saadi, his wife and four young children who were kidnapped with the aid of MI6 and rendered to Tripoli. Saadi was imprisoned and tortured for years by the former regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

The settlement comes after the Saadi family, along with Abdel Hakim Belhaj and his pregnant wife, had in June issued formal legal proceedings in the High Court in London against former Labour Party Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Sir Mark Allen, the former head of counter-terrorism at MI6.

The proceedings alleged that Straw and Allen were complicit “in torture and/or inhuman and degrading treatment; conspiracy to injure; conspiracy to use unlawful means; misfeasance in public office and/or negligence”.

In 2004, Saadi was a leading member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in exile in China. The LIFG, like Al Qaeda, was founded by members of the CIA-backed Islamist Mujahedin who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It had staged a series of attempts to overthrow Gaddafi in the 1990s.

In China, Saadi had contact with British intelligence, which, he alleges, lured him and his family to Hong Kong, supposedly for a meeting with the British High Commission about transferring to the UK. Instead, his family—including children aged six, nine, 11 and 13—were abducted in a joint UK/US operation. Hooded, handcuffed and their legs tied with wire, they were rendered to Tripoli and turned over to Gaddafi’s security forces.

Saadi’s wife and children were released after two months but he was imprisoned for six years and brutally tortured. He says he was interrogated on one occasion by British intelligence, which ignored his

complaint of torture.

Belhaj, also a leading member of the LIFG, and his expectant wife were abducted in Bangkok the same year and rendered to Tripoli by the CIA. They were allegedly flown via Diego Garcia, the British territory in the Indian Ocean. Belhaj was imprisoned for six years, during which time he was abused, hung from walls and forced into ice baths. He says he was also interrogated by MI6 officers who again turned a blind eye to his treatment.

For years, Straw and other Labour ministers had denied any involvement in rendition and torture. But their lies were exposed after the US-led overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011. CIA documents found by Human Rights Watch in the Tripoli HQ of Moussa Koussa, former head of Libya’s security forces, stated, “We are ... aware that your service had been co-operating with the British to effect [Saadi’s] removal to Tripoli ... the Hong Kong government may be able to co-ordinate with you to render [Saadi] and his family into your custody.”

A letter from Allen to Koussa, found in the same office, said, “I congratulate you on the safe arrival of [Belhaj]. This was the least we could do for you and for Libya. I know I did not pay for the air cargo [but] the intelligence [on him] was British.”

It is not only Straw and Allen that were culpable. The Saadi family’s abduction came just two days after then Prime Minister Tony Blair’s notorious “deal in the desert” with Gaddafi on March 24, 2004. The British government was at that time courting the Libyan dictator. In addition to seeking his support for the US-led “war on terror”, Blair secured lucrative oil contracts for BP and Shell.

The kidnap and rendition of Gaddafi opponents for torture was pay-off.

Kat Craig, director of the legal charity Reprieve, which acts for Saadi and Belhadj, said, “We now know that Tony Blair’s ‘deal in the desert’ was bought with ugly compromises. Perhaps the ugliest was for MI6 to deliver a whole family to one of the world’s most brutal dictators.”

The High Court proceedings bought by Saadi and Belhadj could have seen Blair and other ministers called to give evidence under oath.

The compensation deal in no way brings an end to such heinous crimes. While agreeing the pay-out, the government has refused to admit liability in the case of the Saadi family while working to cover over the crimes of the British state with its plans for secret courts. Under the government’s proposed Justice and Security Bill, ministers will be able to establish secret trials in which the public and media are excluded from proceedings in which the government is a defendant. The planned legislation will also prevent the accusers of the British state and their lawyers from accessing and challenging evidence submitted in the government’s defence.

Saadi explained that he decided to take the compensation because the move to secret courts would prevent public dissemination of the evidence. “I went through a secret trial once before, in Gaddafi’s Libya,” he said. “In many ways, it was as bad as the torture. It is not an experience I care to repeat.”

Belhadj is pursuing his legal action.

Only last year, the government agreed to pay 16 alleged terror suspects, including former Guantanamo Bay detainee Binyam Mohamed, around £1 million each to settle charges of British involvement in their abuse and torture.

Such cases are proof that the entire state machinery is guilty of torture, abduction, extraordinary rendition and the denial of due process. More fundamentally, they are the direct outcome of a broader criminal enterprise—the commissioning of illegal wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq and the no less criminal sponsoring of “regime change” in Libya and now Syria.

Having turned over Belhadj and Saadi to Libyan torture chambers, only a few years later the British government was hailing such individuals and the LIFG as “freedom fighters” who must be supported by the west with finance, arms and intelligence to depose

Gaddafi.

In Syria, the same process is underway. Britain is directly involved in supporting and arming Al Qaeda elements under the US-directed plot to stoke up sectarian civil war and install a puppet government, preparatory to “regime change” in Iran. To this end, it is relying on jihadist elements—many of them from the LIFG, with whom it worked against Gaddafi—as once again yesterday’s terrorists become “liberators” and trusted allies.



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