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

Jean Shaoul
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This is the second of a two-part series. Part one was posted on June 19.

Irrefutable evidence

Documents found in abandoned government offices in Tripoli after the 2011 NATO-led invasion of Libya included a letter from Sir Mark Allen, a senior officer in Britain's spy agency MI6, to Libya's intelligence chief, Musa Kusa, who switched sides and fled to Britain, showing that the CIA, with help from British intelligence, used Diego Garcia as a stopover for rendering Belhaj and his pregnant wife.

In the letter dated March 2004, Allen congratulated Kusa on the "safe arrival" of Belhaj and added, "This was the least we could do for you and for Libya to demonstrate the remarkable relationship we have built over recent years." He added that while the CIA had provided the aircraft for the rendition operation, "the intelligence … was British."

The same documents revealed that Britain's SAS was involved in training the Khamis Brigade, commanded by one of Gaddafi's sons and thought to have been behind some of the worst atrocities during the war to overthrow Gaddafi. Ninety of these killers were brought to Britain for instruction, before going back to Libya with Blair's stamp of approval.

The papers noted that officials observed that "the UK is prepared to do anything to maintain its commercial and other ties with Libya." Blair helped Gaddafi's son and heir, Saif al-Islam, obtain his PhD thesis—reportedly plagiarised—while at the London School of Economics.

The papers relating to Britain and MI6's collaboration with Gaddafi were so voluminous that they far exceed those relating to the CIA. None of this stopped Blair, and his successors Gordon Brown and David Cameron, posturing on the international arena as defenders of human rights.

Initially, both Straw and Allen had denied any British involvement in extraordinary rendition, claiming they were "conspiracy theories." When the Libyan documents revealing British complicity in detentions and torture came to light, Straw claimed he could not be expected to know everything the intelligence agencies were doing, while Blair said he did not have "any recollection at all" of the Belhaj rendition.

The intelligence services were determined not to take the blame, and flatly contradicted this, saying that it was "ministerially authorised government policy." Sir Richard Dearlove, head of MI6 at the time, said, "It was a political decision, having very significantly disarmed Libya, for the government to cooperate with Libya on Islamist terrorism."

Belhaj at one point offered to call off legal proceedings in exchange for just £3 in damages, an admission of liability for what was done to him and his wife, and an apology from the British government. The government rejected his offer and sought to get the courts to block a series of legal suits related to the case.

Following the publication of the correspondence in 2011, the Metropolitan Police carried out a four-year investigation, gathering 28,000 pages of evidence about Britain's role in extraordinary renditions and torture, demonstrating that the conduct of a British official amounted to Misconduct in Public Office.

Despite the police recommendation, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) claimed that there was insufficient evidence to charge anyone. However, it was forced to acknowledge that "the suspect," described as a public official, meaning Sir Mark Allen, knew about the rendition.

Belhaj sought a judicial review of the CPS's decision not to prosecute Straw or Allen. In February this year, the court hearings revealed documents showing that the intelligence services viewed all 2 million of Britain's Muslim community as a potential security threat.

Memos stated, "Elements connected to terrorist organisations, especially in countries in North Africa, are involved in criminal operations such as forgery and illegal migration" and "Leaders and key elements of organisations such as Al Qaeda. These elements have 'chemo-biological' abilities."

Britain agreed to Libyan officers operating on the streets of the UK, alongside MI5, its domestic intelligence service, to assist with the surveillance of British-based Libyan dissidents. MI5 preferred to insert moles into the dissident groups deemed a threat rather than use "direct policing, which makes Britain appear as if is against the Islamic community."

Other documents recorded that the British and Libyan security agencies agreed to "work together and exchange information in specific areas" including on Iran, Iraq, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria and Turkey, to increase "cooperation in the field of Internet monitoring" and to set up a direct line "for reporting the sites that

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must be monitored due to the lack of Arabic speakers at the British foreign office."

Determined to prevent any further disclosures, the government demanded secret hearings under the remit of the 2013 Justice and Security Act to "protect national security." However, the court overruled the government's demand for secrecy because the legislation permitting secret hearings related only to civil cases, and this case involved the decision not to pursue a criminal prosecution. Crucially, the judge gave the government two weeks to release the police report as well as statements by 75 witnesses, mainly other government officials interviewed by the police, to Belhaj's lawyers.

Broader issues

The case proves that not a single word the government says about its opposition to these Islamist groups should be believed. It uses them as and when the need arises at home and abroad.

For the most part the media reported May's apology without comment. No one wants to draw attention to the fact that Britain's collusion with Islamist terrorists of Belhaj's ilk is ongoing.

Despite lying repeatedly to Parliament and breaking both government policies and international law, no one in Blair's Labour government is to be blamed or held to account. Neither is anyone in Britain's spy agency or civil service.

The issue will be buried by the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), made up of MPs and peers vetted by the prime minister, which will now examine the Belhaj case. Whatever Straw and any officials tell the ISC, it will all be behind closed doors as the committee meets in private. The ISC has previously accepted uncritically the spy agencies' false statements, including in relation to Britain's role in the detention and torture of the British resident Binyam Mohamed at Guantanamo Bay.

Despite the court ruling, the government is refusing to release the Belhaj file and is seeking to stop the release of other documents concerning the relationship between British and Libyan regime requested under Freedom of Information by Nigel Ashton, professor of international history at the London School of Economics.

Ashton originally requested files covering the period from the Lockerbie bombing in December 1988 to the 2011 invasion, but later narrowed his request to the period 1990 to 2002, as part of his broader examination of Britain's response to the Lockerbie bombing and Gaddafi's support for the IRA during the "troubles" in Northern Ireland, the post-2003 period of rapprochement that included Britain's complicity in rendition, and Britain's role in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime.

Last year, a tribunal rejected the government's argument that his request was "vexatious," saying that Ashton's request was for "information which is of great public value and significance." The government is now appealing that ruling, claiming that it would take too long to redact the papers before release to protect national security and international relations, presumably with the US and the CIA.

While former Prime Minister Cameron set up an inquiry led by Judge Peter Gibson to examine evidence that Britain's spy agencies were colluding in the rendition of British citizens and residents to Guantanamo Bay, the US military jail on the island of Cuba, he brought it to an abrupt halt when the Allen-Kusa letters emerged in 2011, transferring Gibson's remit to the ISC that meets in private.

Gibson's report of his initial work to Cameron and the intelligence committee in 2013 acknowledged that "In some instances UK intelligence officers were aware of inappropriate interrogation techniques and mistreatment or allegations of mistreatment of some detainees by liaison partners from other countries. Many of these instances were reported to Agency Head Offices."

Not surprisingly, nothing of substance has emerged from the ISC.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has repeatedly refused to rule out helping the Trump administration in any future rendition programs, despite Trump stating that he favoured "a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding." No government politician has criticised Trump's appointment of Gina Haspel to head the CIA, who was directly implicated in the crimes of torture and forced disappearance, as well as the destruction of evidence of these crimes.

Reprieve, the human rights organisation that supported the Belhajs' legal suits against the government, says that Britain is rewriting the country's torture rules behind closed doors. It added, "The most recent report on the Consolidated Guidance—the rules that apply to the security services where there is a risk of torture or inhumane treatment—revealed that in 2016 alone there were: 921 cases of torture rules being considered—double the previous annual figures; an unprecedented number of acknowledged failures; a failure to apply the rules in 35 cases, and 8 cases where intelligence was passed on in circumstances prohibited by the rules."

Since 9/11, the government and state machinery have eviscerated the entire framework of legal and democratic rights fought for over centuries. While the ostensible target of these measures are Islamist networks, their ultimate target is the working class and any opposition to the government's policies of austerity, war and the assault on democratic rights.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has remained conspicuously silent about May's tacit admission of collusion with Washington in rendition and torture. This is in line with his ongoing efforts to reassure the ruling elite that he can be trusted to lead a Labour government that will safeguard its interests. To this end, he has pledged to recruit 10,000 extra police and provide more money for the army and the intelligence services.

Concluded

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