

Kosovo War at 20: How Britain and America Backed Jihadists Throughout Conflict

By [Kit Klarenberg](#)

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On 24 March 1999, NATO launched a 78-day-long bombing campaign against the then-Republic of Yugoslavia. Still hailed by the Western mainstream as a successful 'humanitarian intervention', the true story of the conflict's roots and legacy is far darker, and points to extensive collaboration between London, Washington and extremist Islamist forces.

The official narrative of the Kosovo War states Serbian leader **Slobodan Milosevic**, President of Yugoslavia, intended to create a 'Greater Serbia' via the annexation of Kosovo, and the 'ethnic cleansing' of its Albanian and Muslim population. Such was the genocidal terror and violence unleashed against civilians, NATO had no choice but to intervene militarily to avert the eradication of hundreds of thousands of people.

This stirring tale would almost completely unravel not long afterward. For one, it's become increasingly clear the bulk of the atrocities committed in Kosovo took place *after* the NATO campaign began, and certainly weren't restricted to Yugoslavian or Serbian forces.

In fact, German reporter Franz Josef Hutsch, a former army major who spent several months embedded with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in 1998 and 1999, [testified at Milosevic's war crimes trial](#) that the terrorist group had deliberately and consistently provoked Serb forces into excessive responses, and were responsible for much of the purge of ethnic Albanians from the region. Likewise, Paul Watson of the LA Times, one of the few US journalists on the ground in Kosovo during the bombing, [repeatedly stated in articles](#) during and after the conflict he never once saw any violence directed at Albanian civilians by Serbs.



Moreover, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, a United Nations body established to prosecute serious crimes committed during the Yugoslav Wars and their perpetrators, would eventually conclude Yugoslav troops had at most [tried to remove](#) rather than eradicate the Albanian population, and Milosevic — who died in a UN prison in 2006 — would be [posthumously exonerated](#) of all charges.

One aspect of the story that's rarely been explored, however, is the collusion between the KLA, al-Qaeda, and the US and UK's respective military and intelligence apparatuses in the years preceding the conflict. The intrigue was quite so deep and cohering, and long-running, it suggests Western powers consciously and determinedly set out to break Kosovo away from Serbia, and complete their ongoing destruction of Yugoslavia — and were intensely relaxed about using the most extreme Islamic fundamentalist elements as their 'ground

troops' in the process.

Killing Fields



The KLA was comprised of ethnic Albanians committed to securing not only an independent Kosovo, but a '[Greater Albania](#)' — an irredentist federation spanning territories in Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and Macedonia — through insurrectionary violence. The exact date of its founding is a matter of debate — some suggest it stretches as far back as 1989, when Slobodan Milosevic revoked Kosovan autonomy and returned the region to its 1945 status — but the group's campaign of terror began in earnest in February 1996, when it undertook a series of attacks against police stations and Yugoslavian government officials, and bombed Serbian refugee camps created in the aftermath of the brutal civil wars in Croatia and Bosnia.

As German political scientist **Matthias Kuntzel** [has noted](#), the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) — Germany's foreign intelligence service — was instrumental in the initial recruitment, training and arming of KLA fighters, in order to extend German influence throughout the Balkans. Several sources suggest Berlin had designs on Kosovo's immense resource wealth — the Stari Trg mining complex, [dubbed by journalist Chris Hedges](#) "the most valuable piece of real estate" in the region, was a ripe source of coal, lead, zinc, cadmium, gold and silver, worth at least US\$5 billion at the time. Chillingly, the mine had provided the bulk of the material for Nazi U-Boat batteries following the April 1941 Axis invasion of Yugoslavia.

In any event, after the KLA's initial burst of savagery, similar strikes would be carried out intermittently every few months, leading the US State Department to classify the group as a terrorist organisation at the start of 1998. [Its official analysis](#) noted the KLA was financed by the drugs trade, organised crime and a variety of governments — most notably the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia — and wealthy individuals in the Middle East, including Osama bin Laden. The al-Qaeda chief had established a base of operations in Albania [in 1994](#), precipitating the steady flow of jihadists from over half a dozen countries in the Middle East into Kosovo subsequently. [One KLA unit](#) was even led by the brother of Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda cofounder and bin Laden's deputy.

Despite Washington's official designation, and the passing in March 1998 of [UN Security Council Resolution 1160](#) which banned "external support for terrorist activity in Kosovo, including finance, arms and training", the CIA and US special forces secretly armed and trained KLA operatives in Albania throughout the year, before dispatching them back to Kosovo to assassinate Serbian politicians and policemen, and harass and intimidate Kosovo Albanians insufficiently enthusiastic about Kosovan independence. These efforts significantly strengthened the KLA — by the end of 1998, its fighters numbered in excess of 30,000, and the group were in outright control of several areas of Kosovo.

[In 2001](#), **James Bissett**, former Canadian ambassador to Yugoslavia and Albania, revealed the purpose of this strategy was explicitly to inflame and escalate tensions in order to create a pretext for Western intervention.

"The hope was that with Kosovo in flames NATO could intervene and in so doing, not only overthrow Milosevic...but more importantly, provide the aging

and increasingly irrelevant military organization with a reason for its continued existence,” he explained.

This objective was well-understood by KLA leaders — in a 2000 BBC documentary, [Moral Combat: NATO At War](#), Hashim Thaci, a key figure in the group elected President of Kosovo in April 2016, said KLA attacks were specifically carried out against Serbian authorities in order to “bring retaliation against civilians”.

“The more civilians were killed, the chances of international intervention became bigger, and the KLA of course realised that. There was this foreign diplomat who once told me, ‘Look, unless you pass the quota of five thousand deaths you’ll never have anybody permanently present in Kosovo from foreign diplomacy’,” Dug Gorani, an Albanian Kosovar negotiator unconnected to the KLA, told the same programme.

The US Defence Intelligence Agency also enlisted the help of British foreign spy agency MI6 to arm and train the KLA, with the support of the Special Air Service (SAS) and private security companies. The SAS would also be heavily involved in the planning and execution of NATO’s bombing campaign — under the auspices of [‘Operation Picnic’](#), members of the special forces unit were inserted into Kosovo in the early hours of 21 March 1999, in order to covertly identify the location of Serbian military units, materiel and supply lines, and potential invasion routes for NATO ground forces — they were assisted in their mission by KLA operatives.



KLA soldiers with US Marines, June 30, 1999. Reports that MI6 and UKSF had funded, trained and supplied the KLA began to embarrass the UK government when the KLA ended up carrying out attacks against Serb civilians inside post-war Kosovo.

Photo : US DoD

Once the campaign began, the KLA and SAS would call in the majority of the military alliance's airstrikes against both military and civilian targets, but despite this intimate and long-running relationship, Whitehall ministers vehemently denied Britain had been supporting the KLA in any way at every stage.

"The stated objective of the Kosovo Liberation Army is...to forge a greater Albania. There is no place on the international map for a greater Albania, any more than there is for a greater Serbia or a greater Croatia. As I stressed in my statement, that is why the objective of our policy is to ensure that the elected, democratic politicians of Kosovo, and not the gunmen, are left in control of Kosovo," then-Foreign Secretary Robin Cook [told Parliament 19th October 1998](#).

Even then-Prime Minister Tony Blair repudiated the suggestion while the conflict was well under way and the links were indisputable, with the media openly referring to the KLA as NATO's "eyes and ears" on the ground in Kosovo — [he stated 13th April 1999](#):

"Our position on training and arming the KLA remains as it has been — we are not in favour of doing so, not least because of the UN embargo that is in place. We have no plans to change that."

Exporting Terror

Once the bombing campaign started, Albanians and Muslims residing in the Britain started travelling to Kosovo to join the ground fight — their passage was permitted, if not outright facilitated, by London. This phenomenon has been a feature of many 'civil wars' in the Middle East and elsewhere — for instance, [during the Soviet war in Afghanistan](#), mujahideen fighters were trained at a variety of camps in Britain, often by Afghans already residing in the UK. Rahmatullah Safi, a former senior officer in the royal Afghan army, trained as many as 8,000 insurrectionists, and continued to live in the UK well into the 1990s, [when he was regarded](#) by the UN as the Taliban's key representative in Europe.

Similarly, several Libyan rebel fighters involved in the violent overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi — including Manchester bomber Salman Abedi and his father — many of whom were subject to 'control orders' restricting their movements, requiring them to remain at a registered address for up to 16 hours a day, and limiting their access to communications resources, [were offered](#) an 'open door' by British authorities to fight in Tripoli in 2011.

Furthermore, mujahideen already in other parts of the former Yugoslavia — [in particular Bosnia](#), where as many as 3,000 insurgents fought on the side of the Bosnian Muslim Army 1992-1995 — were diverted to Kosovo at the behest of Washington and London. Intriguingly, it appears British army military intelligence specialist [James Le Mesurier](#) came with them — there, he was chief intelligence coordinator, a role he took up in Kosovo's capital Pristina once NATO's bombing campaign started. He would go on to work for a variety of private security companies, before founding the [controversial White Helmets group](#) in Turkey in 2013.

Al-Qaeda allegedly wasn't the only Islamist group MI6 colluded with in Kosovo. Former US Justice Department prosecutor and army intelligence officer John Loftus claimed in the wake of the 7th July 2005 London Underground bombings that MI6 [recruited three senior al-](#)

[Muhajiroun figures](#) — Bakri Mohammed, Abu Hamza and Haroon Rashid Aswat — in 1996 to influence terrorist activities in the Balkans. This alleged connection is particularly notable given Aswat was a central figure of investigations into the network which apparently facilitated the 7/7 tube bombings — in November 2004 he met with the attack's alleged ringleader Mohammad Siddique Khan and accomplice Shehzad Tanweer in Pakistan, and he left the UK for India, mere hours before the attacks. Suggestions he remained a British intelligence informant, if not agent, during this period have never been satisfactorily resolved.

Another individual trained at the Kosovo camps was [Omar Khan Sharif](#), a British-born Muslim who in 2003 attempted to carry out a suicide bombing attack in a bar in Tel Aviv, Israel. He apparently got cold feet at the last minute, and ended up fighting his way out of the bar while his accomplice, Londoner Asif Hanif, killed himself, two musicians and a waitress. Sharif's decomposing body was later found floating off a nearby beach. The specifics of his last hours remain a mystery 16 years later — although it became clear post-7/7 he'd attended al-Muhajiroun meetings in Britain, was an admirer of Abu Hamza, and met Siddique Khan in 2001.

What's clear though is covert Western support of the KLA and other fundamentalist elements endured long-after NATO's bombing campaign ended in June 1999. Once Milosevic fell in 2000 and the death of Yugoslavia was complete, the group merely extended their sphere of conflict to Macedonia and southern Serbia, in service of their 'Greater Albania' project — an endeavour [the US supported](#), at least initially. NATO ground forces and their proxies stood by while guerrillas pushed past a five-kilometre-wide 'exclusion zone' armed with mortars and other weapons — the US' NATO 'partners', including the UK, seemed less enthused by the prospect.

"The CIA has been allowed to run riot in Kosovo with a private army designed to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic. Now he's gone the US State Department seems incapable of reining in its bastard army," a European Kosovo Force battalion commander [remarked in March 2001](#).

Nonetheless, despite Whitehall's disapproval of the KLA's new jihad, several of the group's commanders — now battling under the National Liberation Army (NLA) banner — had been trained by the SAS at camps in northern Albania 1998 —1999. One was in charge of facilitating and managing the flow of weapons and fighters into Macedonia, while the other coordinated assaults on the town of Tetovo in the north of the country. NLA commander Gezim Ostreni was trained by the SAS to head the UN-sponsored Kosovo Protection Corps, a group intended to replace the KLA.



Despite condemnation of the NLA's activities by NATO Secretary-General **Lord Robertson** — [who dubbed them](#) “a bunch of murderous thugs whose objective is to destroy a democratic Macedonia” — Washington provided extensive technical and material support to the NLA, to the extent US forces helped evacuate 400 of the group's fighters when they became encircled by Macedonian forces. This backing was pivotal to the NLA's success, and by August 2001 the group occupied and controlled almost a third of Macedonia's territory.

At this point, due to pressure from NATO member states and the European Union, the US rescinded its assistance, and along with European negotiators pressured representatives of Slav and Albanian Macedonians to sign a peace deal. In return for constitutional and administrative changes designed to secure equal rights for Albanian Macedonians in Macedonia, insurgents would stop fighting and hand in many of its weapons to NATO, while receiving amnesty from prosecution. The deal was signed 13th August — approximately a month later, al-Qaeda would carry out the infamous 9/11 attacks.

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