

# Manchester Bomber Was a UK Ally

Part 1 of Declassified UK's investigation into the Manchester Bombing

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Global Research, June 29, 2022

[Declassified UK](#) 27 June 2022

Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Terrorism](#)

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**Salman Abedi** and his closest family were part of Libyan militias benefitting from British covert military support six years before he murdered 22 people at the Manchester Arena in 2017. He is likely to have been radicalised by his experience.

The Manchester bomber and his closest family were part of Islamist militia forces covertly supported by the British military and Nato in the Libyan war of 2011.

The UK facilitated the flow of arms to Libyan rebel militias at the time, and helped train them, in a programme outsourced to its close ally, the Gulf regime of Qatar.

One of Salman Abedi's close friends, **Abdalraouf Abdallah**, who was later convicted in the UK for terrorism offences related to Syria, fought in the 2011 Libyan war for the main militia group the UK helped to take over the Libyan capital.

Abdallah told the Manchester Arena inquiry he was trained by Nato at the time - a claim Nato denies.

**Salman Abedi and his brothers Ismail and Hashem** may have received training from militant groups that British special forces were working with to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi's Libyan regime.

Evidence points to the Manchester bomber being radicalised by his experience in the UK-supported war in Libya in 2011. Aged 16 at the time, it was the beginning of the road that led to him murdering 22 innocent people at the Ariana Grande pop concert six years later.

## Martyrs and Revolutionaries

Muammar Gaddafi's regime had been in power since 1969 and when an 'Arab Spring'

uprising began in February 2011, a variety of militia groups were formed to overthrow him.

Dozens of men from the British-Libyan community in Manchester flocked to the country to join the fight. They were of varying political convictions, from nationalist to jihadist.

Irrespective of their ideologies, Libyan militia forces were backed by Nato, which launched thousands of air strikes beginning in March 2011 against Gaddafi's forces. The military intervention, which was led by the UK, France and the US, was backed across the British media and parliament.

The Manchester bombing inquiry heard that the Abedi family was associated with the February 17th Martyrs Brigade and the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade, the latter which focused on seizing the Libyan capital, Tripoli. There was considerable fluidity of personnel between the militias.

The inquiry, which finished hearing testimonies in March and will report later this year, also heard [evidence](#) from the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) that Salman Abedi either fought with the Martyrs Brigade during the 2011 war or attended a training camp or both.

A police raid on a house a few months before the bombing found 65 photographs taken during the Libyan war apparently showing Salman and his younger brother Hashem in camouflage uniforms, holding weapons, and with an insignia on the wall behind of the Martyrs Brigade.

Hashem was convicted in 2020 of helping his brother plan the bombing and sentenced to 55 years in jail.

The Facebook account of Salman's older brother Ismail also [contained](#) an image of him holding a rifle with the Martyrs Brigade flags behind him and other images with him in camouflage clothing holding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher and a machine gun.

## The father

The inquiry was also [told](#) that Salman's father **Ramadan Abedi**, who had a long history of opposition to the Gaddafi regime and of association with Islamist extremists in the UK, was part of the Martyrs Brigade and the Tripoli Brigade.

Ramadan [took](#) Salman and Hashem to the Libyan capital in August 2011 to aid the rebels. This was just as the militia forces were descending on Tripoli.

Police [told](#) the inquiry that Ramadan's sister Rabaa informed them he had returned to fight the regime and that he received a shrapnel wound in his back which stopped him fighting on the front line.

A fellow fighter in Libya, **Akram Ramadan**, [said](#) he fought with Ramadan as part of the 'Manchester Fighters' and that he saw Ramadan "in the mountains and later in Tripoli".

It remains unclear if Salman fought in Libya. His friend Abdalraouf Abdallah [told](#) the inquiry he didn't see him fighting on the front line but "probably he did fight".

A cousin of the Abedi brothers [said](#) that, following the downfall of the Gaddafi regime, Salman obtained a job locating Gaddafi supporters.

## Covert support

UK military forces on the ground, working with Nato, covertly supported the Libyan militias and directly aided the Tripoli Brigade's takeover of the capital.

In answer to a parliamentary question, the UK government [said](#) in March 2018 it "likely" had contacts with the Martyrs Brigade in the 2011 war. But Whitehall has, unsurprisingly, never publicised its support for the Islamist forces.

Britain had dozens of special forces in [Libya](#) calling in air strikes and helping rebel units assault cities still in the hands of pro-Gaddafi forces.

But Whitehall went further, secretly [training](#) rebel groups in advance of the attack on Tripoli. SAS operatives [advised](#) rebels on tactics as they prepared to storm the capital.

The Tripoli Brigade was the main rebel force that eventually took over the capital in late August 2011. In its ranks fought both Abdalraouf Abdallah and his brother Mohammed, who was also later convicted of terrorism in the UK for joining Islamic State in Syria.

The *Telegraph* [reported](#) at the time that British and French intelligence officers played a key role in planning the final rebel assault on Tripoli.

UK special forces reportedly "infiltrated Tripoli and planted radio equipment to help target air strikes" and "carried out some of the most important on-the-ground missions by allied forces before the fall of Tripoli", US and allied officials told [Reuters](#).

This was part of a broader [plan](#) involving Nato and Qatari forces which took months of planning, and involved secretly arming rebel units inside the capital.

Those units helped Nato destroy strategic targets in the city, such as military barracks and police stations, as they attacked the capital from all sides.

The Ministry of Defence refused *Declassified's* freedom of information request asking for records it holds on the Tripoli Brigade. It said it could "neither confirm nor deny" it held such information.

## 'Rebel air force'

A rebel planning committee, which included the Tripoli Brigade, [drew up](#) a list of dozens of sites for Nato to target in the days leading up to their attack on the capital.

The Tripoli Brigade-led military [advance](#) came amid an increased number of sorties and bombings by Nato aircraft. British Tornado fighter planes destroyed targets such as an intelligence communications facility concealed in a building in southwest Tripoli and government-controlled tanks and artillery.

Husam Najjair, a sub-commander in the Tripoli Brigade, wrote in his [memoir](#) after the war of Nato "backing us up from the air" as his forces attacked Gaddafi's powerful Khamis Brigade, named after his youngest son.

Nato jets also [struck](#) targets around the Gaddafi leadership compound at Bab al-Aziziya, which was taken by the Tripoli Brigade, as Najjair documents in his book. The base was

“bombed repeatedly by Nato”, he wrote.

A [report](#) by the global intelligence firm Stratfor, revealed by WikiLeaks, noted that Nato “served as the de facto rebel air force...during this push into Tripoli”.

It highlighted the seminal role played by Nato in the rebels’ success, stating that a “compelling rationale for the apparent breakthrough by rebel forces is an aggressive clandestine campaign by Nato member states’ special operations forces”.

This was “accompanied by deliberate information operations – efforts to shape perceptions of the conflict.”

## **Arming the militias**

The UK may have directly armed the militias with which the Abedis were associated, and certainly helped to ensure they were armed.

A France24 [film](#) that followed the Tripoli Brigade’s seizure of the capital noted that Britain and France had given weapons to the unit. This was later [denied](#) by Husam Najjair, who appeared in the film.

As early as March 2011 the adviser to then US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, Sidney Blumenthal, [informed](#) her that French and British special forces were working out of bases in Egypt, along the Libyan border, and that “these troops are overseeing the transfer of weapons and supplies to the rebels”.

The SAS was [operating](#) closely with Qatari special forces which were delivering large quantities of arms to the militias such as Milan anti-tank missiles. A [video](#) posted on Youtube in May 2011 appeared to show the Martyrs Brigade testing Milans.

Overall the UK government was “using Qatar to bankroll the Libyan rebels”, the *Times* [reported](#), since the militias lacked the firepower to win the war by themselves.

The Obama administration secretly gave its [blessing](#) to Qatari arms shipments in spring 2011 and soon began receiving reports that the supplies were going to Islamic militant groups.

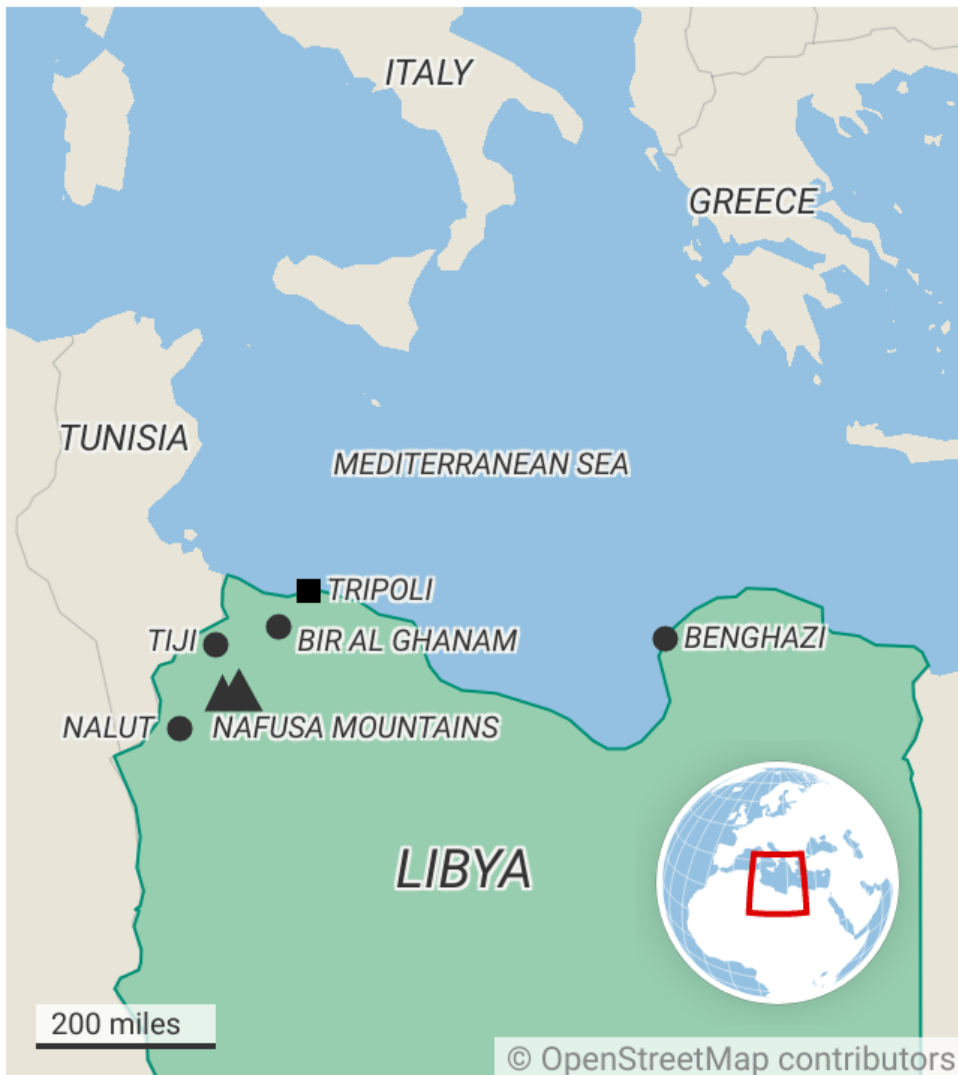
Nato air and sea forces around Libya had to be alerted not to interdict the cargo planes and freighters transporting these arms into Libya.

Overall, Qatar is [believed](#) to have sent \$400m in aid to the militias, involving huge quantities of arms. All the weapons supplies were illegal since they contravened an arms embargo, as a UN security council [report](#) of 2013 documented.

Qatar also later [admitted](#) deploying hundreds of its own troops to support the Libyan rebels. Its chief-of-staff, Major-General Hamad bin Ali al-Atiya, said the regime “supervised the rebels’ plans because they are civilians and did not have enough military experience”.

He also said: “We acted as the link between the rebels and Nato forces.”

But Qatar also [helped](#) train and [equip](#) the Tripoli Brigade specifically.



## Training in the western mountains

The militants in the Tripoli Brigade who successfully took the capital had swept through the country from the west, from their base at the town of Nalut in the Nafusa Mountains, about 280 kilometres from Tripoli.

The Brigade had been [formed](#) in late [April](#) in Benghazi by Mehdi al-Harati, an Irish-Libyan living in Dublin, and Husam Najjair, his brother-in-law, a 32-year-old building contractor also living in the Irish capital.

The Brigade received [training](#) from Qatari special forces in Nalut and is also [reported](#) to have flown some rebel commanders to the Gulf state for training.

Some reports have said Britain was involved in this secret training of opposition [fighters](#) in the Nafusa mountains, alongside Qatari and French forces.

Indeed, a [Reuters investigation](#), quoting several allied and US officials, as well as a source close to the Libyan rebels, noted that Britain played a key role in organising this training.

It reported that British, French and Italian operatives, as well as representatives from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, began in May 2011 to organise serious efforts to hone the rebels into a more effective fighting force. Most of the training took place in the rebel-held

western mountains.

## Fighting with Nato

“We started from the border of Tunisia, called Jebel Nafusa”, Abdalraouf Abdallah [told](#) the Manchester bombing inquiry. He said he received training from Nato on “how to aim, shoot and reload”, and that he was “translating for Nato”.

“We were fighting and Nato fighting actually with us, or alongside with us, as the British Government also,” he added. “And then there was a big plan of how to take over Tripoli because that was the stronghold of Gaddafi”.

In his memoir Tripoli Brigade sub-commander Husam Najjair [reveals](#) that “three American Nato officials” visited the unit’s Nalut headquarters in the Nafusa mountains. “Having communication with Nato was very important to us, so we were happy to show them around”, he wrote.

“They made it clear they didn’t want media attention”, he added.

Najjair says he once acted as a translator between the Americans and two Libyan gun smugglers funnelling arms into Tripoli. This was “to give the Yanks as much information as possible about the coordinates of the latest loyalist military installations”.

Najjair also wrote that he met the Americans “to detail our plans for the advance and our military targets” as the brigade pushed towards Tripoli. He had a “walkie-talkie direct to Nato”, he quotes his commander, Mehdi al-Harati saying to him.

A Nato official told *Declassified*: “There were no forces under Nato command in Libya during the conflict in 2011. In line with its mandate from the UN Security Council, Nato’s mission in Libya consisted of policing the arms embargo, patrolling a no-fly zone, and protecting civilians from attack by Gadhafi forces.

The official added: “While it is a matter of public record that some Nato Allies had small military contingents on the ground in Libya, Nato was not involved in training opposition forces.”

## The road to Tripoli

British and Nato forces helped the Tripoli Brigade in its campaign towards the capital by taking towns and villages in the western mountains and en route.

The rebels’ advances were [aided](#) by newly-arrived Apache attack helicopters operating from Britain’s HMS Ocean, an amphibious assault ship, and which destroyed armoured vehicles. Nato aircraft also dropped leaflets to dispirit Gaddafi’s forces and reinforce rebel morale.

One town the Tripoli Brigade took in the western mountains was Bir Ghanam where rebel forces used tanks to fight Gaddafi’s troops in early August. Nato forces hit [targets](#) in the area to aid the rebels’ advance.

The UK government [reported](#) on 8 August “a precision strike was conducted against a location near Bir al-Ghanam in the Djebel Nafousa” and other patrols over and missions against targets in the Nafusa mountains.

Three days later it [reported](#) that “UK aircraft also attacked a command and control node and a weapons depot in Bir al-Ghanam”.

Another town where the Tripoli Brigade fought to remove pro-Gaddafi forces was Tiji. It was here in August 2011 that Abdalraouf Abdallah was shot in the back and paralysed from the waist down fighting for the Tripoli Brigade.

Fighting alongside him was the Royal Air Force (RAF). The UK government [reported](#) on 8 August that Tornado jets “were ... able to prosecute successfully a target of their own, destroying a military staging post further south at Tiji.”

Other Nato forces were also conducting [airstrikes](#) around Tiji at this time.

Najjair wrote that Tiji was “a turning point” for his Tripoli Brigade since it stood its ground in the face of “the intensity of the firepower we were up against”. “It proved to the mountain lads the real potential of the Tripoli Brigade”, he wrote.

## Radicalisation

Abdalraouf Abadallah was a long-time friend of Salman Abedi and his family and he was visited by Salman in jail in the months before the 2017 Manchester bombing.

Matthew Wilkinson, who gave evidence to the inquiry as an expert on Islamic extremism, [said](#) Abdallah was one of the “major influences in that process of radicalising” Salman Abedi.

The Greater Manchester Police gave conflicting evidence to the inquiry. It [said](#) in its closing submission that Abdallah’s influence was “likely to have been ideological motivation and encouragement rather than... a more practical hands-on assistance” and that “there is no evidence that he was involved in attack planning”.

But the police’s senior investigating officer, Det Chief Supt Simon Barraclough previously [stated](#) to the inquiry: “It is highly suspected that Abdallah played some part in the planning, influence and ideological motivation of the attack”.

That assertion is, however, strongly [rejected](#) by Abdallah’s lawyers. What is clearer is that Salman was likely radicalised by his experience in Libya to some degree.

A lawyer for the bombing victims, Pete Weatherby, [stated](#) to the inquiry that “it is highly likely that he [Salman] had a baptism of violence by exposure to the 2011 uprising... and that he met others in Libya with a violent extremist ideology at that stage.”

Austin Welch, another lawyer for the families, [said](#) the 2011 war was “key to their radicalisation”, referring to Salman and Hashem. Although they may not have been fully radicalised then, Welch added, “common sense dictates that exposing teenage boys to the experience of an armed group and fighting in a war zone would have had a profound effect on them”.

While [MI5](#) and parliament’s [Intelligence and Security Committee](#) have acknowledged the Manchester bomber was likely radicalised by his father, Ramadan, neither is keen to stress the Abedis’ participation in a war that Britain backed.

Yet the counter-terror chief of the North West Counter Terrorism Unit, Det Supt Russ Jackson, has been more open. He has [said](#): “If you have been in Syria, or Libya during the anti-Gaddafi fighting then you could have got exposed to all sorts of radicalised groups. You may come back having fought against Gaddafi in a more radicalised position.”

## Aftermath

The war turned Libya into a lawless country with vast ungoverned spaces that enabled Islamic State to flourish for several years after 2011. The country remains divided today, with two rival governments, and an ongoing civil war.

Yet David Cameron visited Tripoli soon after its ‘liberation’ and claimed a victory.

Abdallah [told](#) the inquiry that “David Cameron praised us very well after the revolution and he came and he was very proud of us and very proud of the sacrifice that we did”.

Indeed, Cameron gave a [speech](#) to the United Nations in September 2011 claiming “the Libyans liberated themselves”. He even specifically praised “the warriors from the Nafusa mountains, who defied Gaddafi’s shells from inside their ancestors’ caves, before going on to help free Tripoli”.

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*Featured image: Salman Abedi holds a heavy machine gun in Libya. (Photo: Police handout)*

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