

British MPs Tout NATO's 'Kosovo Success Story' as Reason to Bomb Syria

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Kosovo is often cited by liberal interventionists as NATO's success story and now a reason for attacking Syria. However, the ongoing lawlessness in the country shows nothing could be further from the truth.

In 1999, NATO bombed Yugoslavia for 78 days, culminating in the withdrawal of Yugoslav troops from the Serbian province of Kosovo. Tens of thousands were killed or maimed by the airstrikes, and Kosovo was carved out as a NATO statelet under the control of UNMIK (the United Nations Mission in Kosovo) in alliance with its local quislings the Kosovo Liberation Army (the KLA).

Last month's parliamentary debate on British airstrikes in Syria witnessed several MPs citing the operation as a great success. Labour MP Ivan Lewis was "proud of the difficult choices that we made" in Kosovo and elsewhere, which he claimed "saved hundreds of thousands of lives".

Kosovo was particularly held up by those supporting British military action in Syria as an example of how airstrikes alone, without support from ground forces, can be victorious. Mocking those who argued that "coalition action which rests almost wholly on bombing...will have little effect", Margaret Beckett responded "well, tell that to the Kosovans, and do not forget that if there had not been any bombing in Kosovo perhaps 1 million Albanian Muslim refugees would be seeking refuge in Europe."

Conservative MP Richard Benyon concurred, adding: "I asked one of my constituents--someone who knows a bit about this, General Sir Mike Jackson--whether he could remember any conflict where air power alone made a difference. He thought and said one word: Kosovo."

The argument is entirely fallacious. One obvious difference between the NATO bombing of Kosovo in 1999 and the British bombing of Syria today is the contrast in their stated aims. NATO was ostensibly bombing Yugoslavia to achieve a limited goal - the secession of Kosovo. In Syria today, however, the ostensible aim of airstrikes against ISIS is the destruction of ISIS. In other words, while the first aimed to force a concession from the force it was targeting; the other apparently aims at the total elimination of its target. While enough punishment might persuade someone to concede a demand, it will not persuade anyone to agree to their own eradication. There is, thus, no parallel in the logic behind the two campaigns, and anyone trying to draw one is being entirely disingenuous.

Secondly, when the actual historical record is examined it becomes clear that, even on its own terms, NATO did not actually achieve its demands. The Rambouillet 'agreement' was

NATO's eleventh hour diktat to Yugoslavia on the eve of bombing, designed to be rejected in order to justify the bombing raids. The key bone of contention for Yugoslavia in this document was that it demanded NATO troops be granted full access to air fields, roads, ports and railroads across the country – that is to say, an effective NATO occupation of the entire federal republic.

Obviously, as Sara Flounders and John Catalinotto of the International Action Centre have written, “no self-respecting government could accept such an ultimatum”. Instead, the Yugoslav government offered to withdraw their troops from Kosovo. This was rejected by NATO, who began bombing within days. After nearly three months of heroic resistance from the Yugoslav people, the bombing ended with Yugoslav troops withdrawing from Kosovo – without any NATO occupation of the rest of the country. That is to say, the war was brought to a close on the terms originally offered by the Yugoslavs, and not on the terms demanded by NATO at the outset: hardly the overwhelming victory claimed by the likes of British General Mike Jackson.

‘Opposition has enough gas:’ Anti-Serbia MPs teargasses Kosovo parliament...again <http://t.co/85GibFAqXZpic.twitter.com/kzmgtwHMLV>

— RT (@RT_com) [October 16, 2015](#)

What really gives the lie to the ‘Kosovo success’ narrative, however, is simply the condition of NATO’s statelet today. An in-depth piece by Vedat Xhymshiti in Foreign Policy Journal last month notes that “Kosovo is the poorest and most isolated country in Europe, with millionaire politicians steeped in crime. A third of the workforce is unemployed, and corruption is widespread. Youth unemployment (those aged 25 and under) stands at 2 in 3, and nearly half of the 1.8 million citizens of Kosovo are considered to be in poverty. From December 2014 until February 2015, about 5% of the population was forced to leave the country in an effort to find a better life, studies and more dignified jobs, on their uncertain path towards wealthier countries in the EU.”

The British MPs’ argument that NATO’s takeover of Kosovo was achieved by airstrikes alone, without ground forces, is a lie. NATO’s allies in 1999 were the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army), a violent sectarian group who openly sought the establishment of an ethnically supremacist state – much like the forces supported by NATO in Libya, Syria and Ukraine. Once NATO had destroyed the Yugoslav administration in Kosovo, effective power on the ground passed to the KLA, who set about implementing their vision of an ethnically pure Kosovo via a series of pogroms, massacres and persecutions of the province’s Serb, Jewish and Roma populations. They gained effective control of Kosovan politics, and used this power to guarantee themselves impunity both for their historic and ongoing war crimes, and for their massive expansion of organized criminality.

In December 2010, a Council of Europe report named Kosovan Prime Minister and former KLA leader Hashim Thaci “the head of a “mafia-like” Albanian group responsible for smuggling weapons, drugs and human organs through eastern Europe”, according the Guardian newspaper’s [summary](#). Following NATO’s intervention, Thaci’s Drenica group within the KLA, according to the report, seized control of “most of the illicit criminal enterprises” in which Kosovans were involved in Albania. The report noted that “agencies dedicated to combating drug smuggling in at least five countries have named Hashim Thaçi and other members of his Drenica group as having exerted violent control over the trade in

heroin and other narcotics.” The human rights investigator who authored the report, Dick Marty, commented that: “Thaçi and these other Drenica group members are consistently named as ‘key players’ in intelligence reports on Kosovo’s mafia-like structures of organised crime.”

In addition to their leading role in Europe’s heroin smuggling trade, Thaci and his group were also named as having been responsible for a professional organ smuggling operation involving the kidnapping and murder of Serb civilians in order to harvest and sell their kidneys. Currently serving as both Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Thaci’s NATO protection guarantees he has never been brought to justice for any of these crimes.

Indeed, NATO-sponsored impunity has been a consistent theme amongst the new Kosovan elite. A [report](#) by Amnesty International published in August 2013 noted that “the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) singularly failed to investigate the abduction and murders of Kosovo Serbs in the aftermath of the 1998-1999 conflict” adding that “UNMIK’s failure to investigate what constituted a widespread, as well as a systematic, attack on a civilian population and, potentially, crimes against humanity, has contributed to the climate of impunity prevailing in Kosovo.” Marty’s report, too, noted the “faltering political will on the part of the international community to effectively prosecute the former leaders of the KLA”, and Carla del Ponte, former chief war crimes prosecutor at the Hague, stated that she was barred from prosecuting KLA leaders.

15 years on: Looking back at [#NATO’s ‘humanitarian’ bombing of #Yugoslavia](#)<http://t.co/Rlp7obqSmapic.twitter.com/cnjGqmDeci>

— RT (@RT_com) [March 24, 2014](#)

UNMIK’s responsibilities for police and justice came to an end in December 2008, following Kosovo’s controversial declaration of independence. It was replaced by the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), which, according to Amnesty International, inherited 1,187 war crimes cases that UNMIK had failed to investigate. All the signs are that the overt impunity that has prevailed up until now will be replaced by lip service to the rule of law, accompanied by the prosecution of a few low level operatives, whilst maintaining the protection for those at the top. Following the Council of Europe’s damning report, EULEX spent three years investigating the claims, eventually publishing a verdict that was a textbook case of damage-limitation whitewash. EULEX concluded that the crimes were indeed real, and were linked to leading KLA members, but refused to corroborate the names of any specific individuals involved, despite copious evidence. Thaci’s protection, it seems, is absolute.

Nevertheless, in August of this year, the Kosovan parliament finally and grudgingly [approved](#) (after initially rejecting) the establishment of a special war crimes court to prosecute KLA leaders for crimes committed between 1998 and 2000. In moves highly reminiscent of scenes outside both the Libyan and Ukrainian parliaments when tentative and tokenistic legal moves were made to end the impunity of the sectarian death squads, the parliament has come under repeated attack ever since. Riots and six separate teargas [attacks](#) by the opposition have brought the normal functioning of the Kosovan parliament to a standstill. Failed state status surely beckons.

Meanwhile, the credibility of EULEX, whose officials will be overseeing the establishment of

the new court, was further thrown into doubt in November 2014 when Andrea Capussela, former head of UNMIK's economic unit, released the results of an in-depth [analysis](#) of the most significant cases in which EULEX had been involved. Seven of these she claimed had only been brought after intense international pressure, whilst in a further eight, no investigation was carried out at all, despite "credible and well-documented evidence strongly suggesting that serious crimes had been committed."

She noted that "Eulex's conduct in these 15 cases – the eight ignored ones and the seven opened under pressure – suggests that the mission tended not to prosecute high-level crime, and, when it had to, it sought not to indict or convict prominent figures". During its six years of operating, she noted, only four convictions had been secured – three of them against only secondary figures, whilst "higher-ranking figures linked to the same crimes were either not investigated or indicted". A senior Kosovan investigator noted that "There are people killing people and getting away with it because of Unmik and Eulex," adding that "The political elite and Eulex have fused. They are indivisible. The laws are just for poor people," Indeed, Eulex seem to be operating increasingly like a mafia themselves, last year, putting "pressure", according to Amnesty International, on "journalist, Vehbi Kajtazi, who had reported alleged corruption in EULEX".

In a final twist to NATO's 'success story', Kosovo has now become the largest per-capita provider of fighters for regime change in Syria. The official figure is 300 but more reliable estimates suggests the true figure is more than 1000 (from a population of 2 million), including one of the top ten ISIS commanders, Lavdrim Muhaxheri. As state education, along with most other social provision, has collapsed since 1999, Saudi-sponsored Madrasas have filled the gap, providing an extreme Wahhabi sectarian education now feeding its first generation of impoverished graduates into NATO's new Syrian battlefields. No surprise, then, that Kosovan government's efforts to prevent this have been "superficial and ineffective", according to David Philips in the Huffington Post.

The 'lesson' of Kosovo, then, is not that "airpower works" or any other such nonsense. The real lesson is what it reveals about NATO's formula for the destruction of independent regional powers – relying on a combination of aerial bombardment alongside the empowerment of local sectarian death squads, who come to dominate the political scene in the aftermath, obliterating the rule of law and guaranteeing a dysfunctional state incapable of providing either dignity or security to its citizens. This was the same formula that was used on Libya in 2011 and currently being attempted in Syria today. Of course, for NATO, all of this is indeed a success: Yugoslavia dismembered; its resources plundered at the expense of its desperate and impoverished people; and Kosovo turned into a provider of shock troops for regime change in Syria, and transit hub for heroin and organ trafficking. If this is what NATO calls a success, we must all pray for failure.

Dan Glazebrook is a freelance political writer who has written for RT, Counterpunch, Z magazine, the Morning Star, the Guardian, the New Statesman, the Independent and Middle East Eye, amongst others. His first book "Divide and Ruin: The West's Imperial Strategy in an Age of Crisis" was published by Liberation Media in October 2013. It featured a collection of articles written from 2009 onwards examining the links between economic collapse, the rise of the BRICS, war on Libya and Syria and 'austerity'. He is currently researching a book on US-British use of sectarian death squads against independent states and movements from Northern Ireland and Central America in the 1970s and 80s to the Middle East and Africa today.

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