

Former British MI5 agent alleges plot to assassinate Gaddafi

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When Britain's Labour government arranged the arrest of David Shayler in Paris on August 2, they hoped to stem the tide of embarrassing revelations by the former secret service agent. They failed. Days later, Shayler was making public statements to BBC television's *Panorama* on an alleged plot by Britain's international security service MI6 to kill Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi.

The crisis over Shayler began last year after he left his position in MI5, the domestic intelligence service. He joined MI5, having failed a six-month training course as a *Sunday Times* journalist. One of his first jobs was in a department responsible for vetting government officials. Later he moved to F2 department, dealing with 'counter-subversion' in Britain and specialising in operations against the labour movement. By 1994, he moved again to a section monitoring international terrorism, where he was placed in charge of the Libyan desk. Shayler left MI5 in 1997. He tried to tout his thinly disguised memoirs as a novel to various publishers, before finally selling his unvarnished story to the *Mail on Sunday* in August for £40,000. Having done so he fled to France.

Shayler's articles in the *Mail* were damaging to the security services and the government and were deemed in contravention of the Official Secrets Act. He painted a picture of an incompetent security service, employing drunks and 'long-serving officers' who should, 'have been sacked years ago', squandering a budget of some £200m a year.

Shayler wrote that he had been, 'instructed to carry out operations against tiny organisations and harmless individuals who posed no conceivable threat to national security.' Amongst these he listed National Union of Mineworkers President Arthur Scargill, Prime Minister Tony Blair's right hand man, Peter Mandelson, Home

Secretary Jack Straw and former Social Security Secretary Harriet Harman.

Harman was targeted because of her position as legal director of the National Council for Civil Liberties. Jack Straw was deemed a 'Communist sympathiser' because he was President of the National Union of Students between 1969 and 1971. Peter Mandelson had briefly been a member of the Young Communist League and the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1972.

Shayler expressed concern is over the ability of the security forces to safeguard Britain's interests in the changed international situation following the collapse of Stalinism. 'Even in the early 1990s MI5 was still riddled with 'Reds under the bed' paranoia and showed little inclination to get to grips with the threats posed to the UK in the post-Cold War world', he wrote.

On July 29 Home Secretary Jack Straw made an official statement on MI5 designed to defuse the mounting crisis over Shayler. In many instances, however, he confirmed what Shayler had told the *Mail on Sunday*. Straw admitted that MI5 holds files on half a million individuals it has investigated since it was established in 1909. Of these 230,000 were on individuals 'no longer being investigated', but available to MI5 officers for their current work. Amongst these were all the public figures cited by Shayler, including Straw himself. Fully 20,000 files related to 'active investigations'.

Shayler's latest claims made on the BBC's *Panorama* are even more embarrassing for the government. The BBC was allowed to interview Shayler in Paris after his claims were widely reported in the international media and after Shayler threatened to publish them on the internet, thus bypassing a gagging order imposed by the Blair government. The *Panorama* programme was due

to be broadcast on August 6, but was held up by the Security Services until August 7 and censored.

According to his interview, a Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6) officer handed £100,000 to an Arab agent to mastermind the assassination of Gaddafi. The agent, codenamed Tunworth, had links with a militant Islamic group who arranged a failed attempt on Gaddafi's life in late February 1996. Tunworth's MI6 handler--PT16B--met Shayler while he was in MI5 section G9, responsible for monitoring Libyan activities. Shayler's girlfriend, another ex-MI5 agent Annie Machon, says he 'headed up' the section for two years from August 7, 1994. PT16B told Shayler that a bomb exploded under the wrong car, Gaddafi was unhurt and several civilians were killed or injured. He said that authorisation for the operation, 'went all the way to the top.'

After the initial attempt to silence Shayler failed, the government fell back on official denials. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said that Shayler's claims were 'pure fantasy'. He said he was satisfied that his predecessor, Conservative Sir Malcolm Rifkind, had not authorised an assassination attempt. 'There was SIS proposal to do it and I'm fairly clear there has never been any SIS involvement,' Cook said. Lord Williams, the Home Office Minister, added that there was 'no officially-sanctioned' plot.

Given the way government frames its statements to uphold the principle of 'deniability,' it is worth noting that Cook only said he was 'fairly sure' that the SIS/MI6 was not involved in any assassination attempt, while Williams said that no plot was 'officially sanctioned'.

This is because there is corroborative evidence that an attempt was made on Gaddafi's life in February 1996. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Force claimed to have carried this out in a communiqué to Arab newspapers dated March 6 that year. While the American CIA is legally barred from carrying out assassinations--a prohibition frequently violated--there is no such restriction on MI6 under British law. The 1994 Intelligence Services Act protects MI6 officers carrying out acts outside Britain that, if committed here, would be an offence, as long as they are authorised by the Foreign Secretary. There is evidence that the Secret Intelligence Service has in the past considered exercising this power to assassinate foreign heads of state, most famously against Egyptian President Nasser

during the Suez crisis in 1956. Then Conservative Prime Minister Anthony Eden told the Secret Service, 'What's all this nonsense about isolating Nasser or 'neutralising' him, as you call it? I want him destroyed, can't you understand?'

In its attempts to silence Shayler, the Blair government is facing great difficulties. Accusing him of breaching the Official Secrets Act while at the same time claiming his stories are a fantasy is untenable. More fundamentally Labour's claims to open government and concern for ethical foreign policy are once again being exposed as pure hypocrisy, especially following the earlier scandal over government involvement with the Sandline mercenaries in the overthrow of the military regime in Sierra Leone. Labour in opposition criticised the Official Secrets Act when the Conservatives strengthened it in 1989. Blair and others even voted against it on its third reading in Parliament. Now, however, they are seeking to enforce it on Shayler and have threatened the press with action under its provisions. The government has rejected any independent investigation into Shayler's accusations.

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