

Sunday Times alleges Britain's MI6 played role in Gadhaffi assassination attempt

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A front-page story in the *Sunday Times* of February 13 alleges that the British government and secret services played a role in a 1996 plot to assassinate Colonel Muammar Gadhaffi of Libya. The London-based *Times* quotes extensively from a document published on a Yahoo Internet site which reveals that in November 1995 links were established between one of the prospective assassins and “HMG”—Her Majesty's government.

David Shayler, the former MI6 operative who became a whistle-blower, first leaked details in August 1998 of a bungled assassination attempt involving the British secret services, in which several innocent bystanders were killed. Shayler said he was told that MI6 had paid about £100,000 in instalments to an agent code-named Tunworth to help purchase Jeeps and weapons. Later, at a meeting in room 470 of Thames House, MI5's London headquarters, Shayler said he was told that the attack had failed.

Accounts published in Arab newspapers at the time confirmed that an attempt to assassinate Gadhaffi had taken place. Al-Hayat, the London-based Arab newspaper, reported that rebels had attacked Gadhaffi's motorcade near the city of Sirte in February 1996. Several bystanders were said to have been killed. Gadhaffi claimed to have proof of the plot. “Britain was behind the campaign of assassination. There is evidence and when the time comes we will bring it forward,” he said.

Shayler's claims were categorically denied by the Foreign Office and Robin Cook, the British Foreign Secretary, who called it “pure fantasy”. But British intelligence actually knew of the 1996 assassination attempt at least two months in advance. A member of the assassination squad had given detailed intelligence to his MI6 handler, in the expectation that they would

receive help from Britain.

The four-page document cited by the *Sunday Times* carries a coded header that appears to confirm its authenticity. Its title is “Libya: plans to overthrow Gadhaffi in early 1996 are well advanced”. It gives details of “plans in which he was involved to overthrow Colonel Gadhaffi” and says that “other plotters were aware of his contact with HMG, but did not entirely approve of it”.

The report continues: “The coup was scheduled to start at around the time of the next General People's Congress on February 14, 1996. Coup will start with unrest in Tripoli, Misratah and Benghazi. [Previous] attempt to assassinate Gadhaffi in August [1995] thwarted by security police.”

The report gives a list of Libyan installations that were to be attacked and describes supporters in Libya's principal cities and their occupations. The start of the coup was to be signalled through coded messages on television and radio.

The source told his MI6 handler that the “plotters would have cars similar to those in Gadhaffi's security entourage with fake security number plates. They would infiltrate themselves into the entourage in order to kill or arrest Gadhaffi.”

“One group of military personnel were being trained in the desert area near Kufra for the role of attacking Gadhaffi and his entourage,” the report says. “The aim was to attack Gadhaffi after the GPC [General People's Congress], but before he had returned to Sirte. One officer and 20 men were being trained for this attack.” The source describes contacts between the plotters and the Algerian and Tunisian governments, and with Islamic terrorists.

When Robin Cook was interviewed at the time on BBC's “Breakfast with Frost” current affairs

programme, he insisted that MI6 had no interest in such a plot. “I am perfectly satisfied that the SIS [Secret Intelligence Service] never put forward any such proposal for an assassination attempt, nor have I seen anything in the 15 months that I have been in the job which would suggest that the SIS has had any interest, any role or any experience over the recent decades of any such escapade,” Cook said.

The release of the MI6 report is highly embarrassing for Cook, since it was passed to senior Foreign Office officials at the time. The Foreign Secretary is now being asked whether these officials deliberately kept it from him, or whether he was lying when he denied any link. The leak is clearly timed to exert maximum pressure on the Foreign Office at a time when a new Libyan ambassador is about to be welcomed to London.

Coming as it does from a source within the security establishment, the leaked report sheds further light on high-level splits within the British ruling class over issues of foreign policy. The underlying concern seems to be the relative importance given to British ties to the US as against its ties to its European neighbours. The US made no attempt to hide its displeasure at the recent British decision to go against the previous line that Libya was a terrorist “rogue state” by re-establishing full diplomatic links. The US has refused to repeal the “Iran-Libya Sanctions Act”, under which those trading with the Libyan regime can be subjected to punitive measures.

It would appear that there are those within British ruling circles who would like to forestall the rapprochement with Libya by highlighting the unresolved differences between the two countries. The latest incident follows hard on the heels of another embarrassing leak that Britain had held up and then impounded a shipment of arms said to be bound for Libya, and then kept the affair secret so as not to disturb the restoration of diplomatic links.



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